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THE HIRED VILLAIN IN THE PLAYS OF JOHN WEBSTER

by

MOYRA J. BUCHAN

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled The Hired Villain in the Plays of John Webster, submitted by Moyra J. Buchan in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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The one undoubted quality of Webster's tragedies¹ is their vitality as theatre. Their impact is something highly individual: even in the shadow of Shakespeare the vortex of passions and poses and the flashing vigour of the language show an original, restless brilliance. Generations of critics have admired Webster's effects, yet few have agreed in defining his achievement. It is easy to respond to the line, the sentiment, and the dramatic moment when Vittoria cries, "A rape. A rape. . . . Yes, you have ravish't justice, /Forc'd her to do your pleasure" (III, ii, 274-5); but when one discovers that the metaphor is also Tourneur's and Chapman's,² and considers the moral ambiguity of Vittoria's situation, criticism becomes a more complex matter.

It is useful, first of all, to understand Webster's methods of composition and the issues arising from them. Like his contemporaries, he was an endless borrower. He adapted his plots from popular stories of passion and scandal,³ he exploited the available theatrical conventions, and he kept notebooks of lines and images from his reading which he transferred into his own writing. None of this is in itself unusual, but Webster is exceptional in the degree of his dependence on his commonplace book.⁴ For most of his notable lines there are known sources, in Sidney, for example, or in Montaigne's Essays. Webster's use of the originals reveals his particular skill, for by subtle shifts in sense or rhythm, by condensation or by transposition of adjectives, he frequently transforms an unremarkable detail into

something apt and excellent.⁵ Yet the magpie habit indicates that his imagination was stimulated more often by the ideas of others than by his own. The resulting verse-texture is densely figurative, but the images tend to be self-contained and accumulative in effect, related by logic rather than by natural growth of one from the other.⁶ For instance, Monticelso admonishes Brachiano:

oh my Lord,
The Drunkard after all his lavish cuppes,
Is dry, and then is sober -- so at length,
When you awake from this lascivious dreame,
Repentence then will follow; like the sting⁷
Plac't in the Adders tayle: wretched are Princes
When fortune blasteth but a pretty flower
Of their unweldy crownes; or raveseth
But one pearle from their Scepter: but alas!
When they to wilfull shipwreake loose good Fame
All Princely titles perish with their name.
(II, i, 33-43)

The general impression, especially in the prose speeches of Flamineo and Bosola, is of restless movement and swift turns in thought and feeling. These are stylistic consequences of the borrowing practice.

This patchwork poetry is the medium of a drama equally hybrid, a melting-pot of numerous conventions and traditions. In the preface to The White Devil Webster names the dramatists whom he most admired:

For mine owne part I have ever truly cherisht my good opinion of other mens worthy Labours, especially of that full and haightned stile of Maister Chapman: The labor'd and understanding workes of Maister Johnson: The no lesse worthy composures of the both worthily excellent Maister Beaumont, & Maister Fletcher: And lastly (without wrong last to be named) the right happy and copious industry of M. Shake-speare, M. Decker, & M. Heywood, wishing what I write may be read by their light.

This merely begins to indicate the multiplicity of influences perceptible in Webster's plays. Through these writers filtered the legacy of traditions classical and European, Christian and secular; and the tastes

they answered were those of the groundlings as well as of more sophisticated audiences.⁸ On the one hand, Webster follows Chapman and Senecanism, assuming a moralistic attitude to courtly life which emerges in formal sententious couplets, and lauding the virtues of stoicism in the face of tragedy and death.⁹ On the other hand he employs the familiar revenge motive, with its formula of ghosts, madness, treachery and violence. The Italian scene was a favourite one, found often in Shakespeare, and also in Jonson, Middleton, Marston; Webster's setting, with its society of Renaissance brilliants, provides the ceremonial pageantry of the chronicle play (in the scene of the Pope's election, or of the Cardinal's installation as soldier), together with hot-house¹⁰ passions and Machiavellian intrigues. This is the background of Iago as well as of Flameneo and Bosola, Lodovico and Francisco; here the revenger blends with the Machiavel, and dubious justice is pursued with a ghastly ingenuity. In the sequence of events one can see, too, the old Mediaeval pattern of tragedy, the rise and fall of Fortune's wheel. But Webster worked from the example of other modes of drama as well as tragedy. Miss Inga-Stina Ekeblad has shown how the form of the court masque is incorporated in Act IV of *The Duchess of Malfi*.¹¹ Then there is the fashionable device of the malcontent observer, which Webster uses to deliver a cynical commentary on the action in the manner of Marston's hero in *The Malcontent*; while moments of satirical cuckold-baiting recall the citizen comedies on which he collaborated with Dekker.¹²

Webster's is, in John Russell Brown's phrase, a mongrel drama: multifarious elements come together in a loose episodic structure. We

call the amalgam tragedy, but face the recurrent problem of coordinating our responses to its diverse constituents. Vittoria's courage during her trial and before death is on the heroic scale, yet she is also the butt of Flamineo's satire and the object of sententious condemnation. Can Webster justify this ambiguity? Moreover, with his quick-shifting eclectic style, and without a tight Sophoclean design to hold events together, how does he create the concentration of mood essential to tragedy? These are questions of intention and technique, and they point to the elementary problem in Webster: whether this is a charlatan art which ends in disintegration, or whether his method can be understood as the true expression of the rhythms and perceptions of his own mind. For a writer's technique is his vision. It is that which selects certain details from all the available data of the world and arranges them in a certain shape in the world of his creation.¹³ Is the seeming haphazardness of these plays the sign of an inferior mind unable to control its second-hand material, or does Webster organize that which he has selected into a coherent and meaningful whole?

The theatrical effectiveness of the plays has prompted repeated attempts to discover a "principle of unity" in Webster's art. A good play must have integral structure, both in the propulsion of its events, and in its grouping of moods and forms of language. This does not presuppose a formulaic structure which, as M.C. Bradbrook shows,¹⁴ was far from the experience of the Elizabethan playwright; Webster, like most of his peers, was more concerned with memorable scenes and speeches than with internal consistency or Aristotle's unities.

But while we have moved on from the limited viewpoint that denounced him for his "feeble and foolish" dramaturgy (G.H. Lewes) and the "ramshackle looseness" of his plays (William Archer), it seems defeatist to regard them simply as excusably clumsy. The tendency of Webster's admirers, from Lamb and Swinburne to F.L. Lucas, has been to judge him rather as a poet:

It was a succession of great moments that [the audience] wanted on the stage, not a well-made play. . . . If a dramatist gave them great situations, ablaze with passion and poetry, it would have seemed to them a chilly sort of pedantry that peered too closely into the machinery by which these were produced.¹⁵

This I think avoids the issue. An artist's work is always moulded by the shaping instinct of his mind, and Webster's dramatic world is formed according to the nature of his talent.

Working with the mass of images and conventions before them, modern critics have come to various conclusions. On one point they are unanimous: that out of the self-contained artifice of his borrowed phrases Webster created most impressive language patterns. Images turning, for example, on physic, disease, bestiality, witchcraft, recur in different contexts, giving to each play a linguistic superstructure which provides an informing mood and offers continual ironies. It is less easy to establish consistency in Webster's characterization. Examining the characters' philosophies and motives, critics find disproportions and improbabilities in the plays. Why is the Duchess persecuted? To some she is a victimized innocent; others find her guilty of a sin against degree.¹⁶ Ferdinand's motivation is judged as vague and unsatisfactory, or as convincingly diabolic. Bosola is seen as a mere tool-villain and chorus, or as a tragic protagonist whose presence

justifies the untidy final act.¹⁷ The most recent critical tendency has been to search for a "moral vision" governing the plays which could contain these perplexities of behaviour. Bogard's view is representative: that for Webster the Elizabethan concept of harmony and order has been replaced by the Jacobean ethos of disillusion: to him the world is a "deepe pit of darknesse" governed by evil and irrationality, and the sole remaining value is "integrity of life." In the face of futility the characters' struggle is "to keep themselves as they are, essentially." Ornstein sees a more positive ethic asserted in the figure of the Duchess,¹⁸ but agrees, as do Ribner¹⁹ and Scott-Kilvert,²⁰ that the morality of The White Devil does cut across "the traditional evaluative divisions of good and evil."²¹ Yet this conclusion requires critics to excuse or ignore the sententiae which earlier convinced Lord David Cecil that the basis of Webster's morality was Christian, while Ian Jack dismissed Webster as a "decadent" with no firm system of values, hovering undecided between conscientious platitudes and instinctive pessimism.²²

Final judgements are nearly always qualified, or incomplete. Lucas lets his appreciation rest on Webster's verbal art and the value of stoicism: Clifford Leech concludes that

we are pulled successively in different directions, and on the completion of our reading are likely to feel we have the task of constructing a whole of which Webster has given us the separate parts.²³

The purpose of this thesis is to throw fresh light on the question of Webster's shaping activity, through examination of the motivation and function of two important characters, and to discover to what extent the qualifications are necessary. Perhaps the main flaw in the defenses

of his psychology has been that they over-explain, calling on secondary material to render the action plausible; Lucas and Bradbrook, for instance, cite Renaissance codes regarding the conduct of widows.

But it is a weakness in the play if it does not make the basis of the character's behaviour adequately clear and consistent with the mood established in the image-patterns.²⁴ The most effective recent studies have been those which demonstrate how themes expressed in the imagery are carried through in the action. Hereward T. Price writes: "Webster especially uses imagery to convey the basic conflict of his drama, the conflict between outward appearance and inner substance or reality."

It is an imagery of polar opposites -- sweetmeats which rot, shipwrecks in calmest weather. Correspondingly the action is a structure of ironies. Courtly life is a game of moral pretence, where justice is in the hands of villains and the virtuous are forced into deceit. Webster, says Price,

. . . gives us a universe so convulsed and uncertain that no appearance can represent reality. . . . Figure-in-action and figure-in-word reinforce one another. He repeats his theme tirelessly, spinning innumerable variations with his figures of the magnificent outer show and the inner corruption, of life, fortune, hopes that look so fair and delude us utterly, of the many bitter, twisted ironies of the difference between appearance and reality.²⁵

This is excellent interpretation. The tendency that follows is to call the motivation symbolic, rather than realistic, and to define the scene structure in terms of contrast and analogy rather than temporal progression.²⁶

While this approach is illuminating, and especially useful in discussing characters whose motives are inexplicitly defined (particularly Ferdinand, or the Cardinal), the temporal propulsion cannot be disregarded. Webster affected psychological realism in delineating most of his characters; the

difficulty is to take account of this in strict relation to the symbolic insights and without digression from the dramatic world. Yet through giving close attention to ambiguities of motivation it becomes possible to see in the characterization a consistent preoccupation with human pretence and self-deceit and the problems of a society based only on the semblance of virtue. Ribner's judgement is encouraging from a critical point of view: he sees The White Devil as "a dramatic symbol of moral confusion" in which psychology and imagery contribute to the thematic unity.²⁷

Difficulties in interpretation are perhaps inevitable, considering this subject-matter. Webster's method of composition indicates, too, that he himself was not capable of sustained inspiration; and so apart from the unifying mood of the plays, the integrating principle of his many particles is less likely to be an obvious central purpose than a subtle, ingeniously wrought motive. Flamineo and Bosola, I think, because of their peculiarly Websterian qualities, may reasonably be regarded as likely indices of such a principle.

Of all Webster's characters, these two are commonly recognized as the most original. They illustrate perfectly his eclectic method, for both are constituted of a number of conventional traits. Each is a tool-villain of the Machiavellian kind, seeking preferment through loyal service of corrupt powers. Each is a malcontent, a man of talent who has been "neglected." Each is also, like Jaques, Thersites or Malevole, a satirical observer, as he vents his disappointment in cynical mockery of other men and the general human condition; and in this role each delivers many borrowed sentences and speeches characteristic of Webster's image-checkered

style. Yet both are highly individual, typical of nothing but the prevailing mood of the plays in which they appear.

It has proved almost as difficult to make a satisfactory analysis of these characters as to define Webster's achievement. Some critics dismiss them as choral devices; others wrestle with their motivation, making a last-minute hero of Bosola, and finding Flamineo a tractable supporting player if the awkward sub-plot in Act V is judged as sensationalistic violence.²⁸ These studies show the tendency of much Websterian criticism to rationalize and qualify. Certain facts are agreed upon, however: that there is an obvious kinship between the two figures, that they play an essential part in the precipitation of each play's action, and that their commentaries make an important contribution to the atmosphere of Webster's dramatic universe. Bogard suggests that each to a large extent governs our final impression, though the precise nature of that impression, as we have seen, is widely argued.

This thesis is based on the following supposition: that if these characters are thus representative of Webster's method, prominent in the plays, and typical of his mood, it is likely that they also provide a reliable clue to his purpose; and that an extended study, which takes account of both the psychological realism with which they are presented and their role in the spatial design, will clarify the problems of the respective plays. Finally, since there are individual differences between Flamineo and Bosola as there are between The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, it is possible that a comparison of the characters' functions will do much to illuminate the nature and development of Webster's vision.²⁹

II

The White Devil is a disconcerting compound of brilliant theatre and philosophical confusion. One has an impression of intensely vivid scenes not quite coherently put together; the organizing principle, whatever it is, is obscure. Certain obvious questions arise. Why does the evil Vittoria rouse so much sympathy in contradiction to the conventional morality of the conclusion? Why does the shape-varying Flamineo have the effect of shattering any possible scheme of values? For what reason is the characterization inconsistent, and why does the structure seem disjointed? Because it is hard to see a moving purpose in his design, we suspect a lack of control on Webster's part. For it is axiomatic that, before one can make sense of the theme or controlling philosophy of a drama, one must grasp the organizing principle, the structural mentor, that which explains why the play takes the particular form it does. Aristotle called this principle the Plot. In the light of Webster's method of composition, it seems reasonable to give him the benefit of the doubt and allow that there may be subtly deliberate plotting in the play. A theory of plot must of course be organic, never dependent on external knowledge; it must illuminate or come to satisfactory terms with the initial sense of confusion.

The temptation to theorize from externals arises from the fact that The White Devil is a play without a moral (or philosophical) centre;¹ there is no one protagonist in whom the contest between good and evil is focussed. Instead we have a world dominated by heroic-seeming criminals,

a world in which the good are almost totally ineffective, and Webster's moral purpose is carried by a satiric commentary, a systematic exposure and condemnation of corruption in the individual and society. Flamineo claims attention, first of all, as the principal organ of satire; he is thus responsible for many abrupt changes of tone and intrusions upon the flow of verse and action. It is his indiscriminate destructiveness that makes him, from one point of view, an elusive and inconsistent character and a source of hopeless disintegration from which the play as a whole, both structurally and thematically, cannot escape. But one can interpret this same phenomenon in a more positive fashion. Flamineo with his restless chameleon nature is in fact the most constant source of unity in the play, for where others are unpredictable, he is at least consistent in his destructiveness. This is the nearest thing to a single motive in the loose design; and certainly his shape-changing and cynicism reflect the world of "moral and emotional anarchy"² which is a major part of the experience offered by the play. Flamineo is a creature of this world; but, by virtue of the objective vision necessary to the satirist, he is also detached from it, and it seems logical that he should indicate the view of Webster himself. But he is less a choral device than a character involved in the action who also comments upon it, and it is as a character that he must be approached. His psychological attitude, the motivation behind his commentary -- these have to be understood along with the structural or thematic function of the speeches. What is the reason for this corrosion of all values? And an immediately related question arises: what positive can stand against a satire which itself implies no moral norm?

In The White Devil only the magnetic but dubious heroism of Vittoria survives Flamineo's satire. There is a tension between the two throughout; and it is this, I think, this strange tension between dubious heroism and foul-minded satire, that is the moving power of the play.³ It is my thesis that Flamineo can be seen as a device which modulates, so to speak, the dominant notes sounded by the heroine; that he determines, by his discordant accompaniment, the degree of assent we grant her, and thus governs the tone of the whole piece. I think that an analysis of the constitution of Flamineo, of his effect on the play, and particularly of his relationship to Vittoria, helps to clarify the principle on which the play is plotted; and that it helps also to indicate how far Webster created a controlled tragic structure, and to define the weaknesses in his art.

* * *

The first scene of The White Devil is an overture to the play as a whole, and requires notice because of the themes it establishes. With Lodovico's furious "Banisht!" the world of accepted standards and normal human feelings is discarded.⁴ The terms of reference are those of "Courtly reward and punishment";⁵ the governing motives are desire for worldly pleasure and fear of pain -- both delivered at the whim of "men of Princely ranke," whose apparent magnanimity conceals wolfish viciousness, just as fair-seeming Fortune is in reality a cheating whore. It is a world of disorder, both in the state and in the individual, of sycophancy and injustice, prodigality and prostitution. Such is the experience of Lodovico, and his bitter violent tone controls the scene,

rising to his vow of bloody vengeance:

Ile make Italian cut-works in their guts
If ever I return.

(I, i, 51-52)

Of such currency, he says, "is the worlds almes."

Upon this note follows the first entry of Flamineo with Brachiano. "Quite lost, Flamineo," says Brachiano: abandoned, that is, to the pursuit of an illicit passion. And in this Flamineo is "prompt /As lightning to your service." For a moment there is the illusion of a grand amour: Zanche the Moor "is wondrous proud /To be the agent for so high a spirit," and Brachiano intones, "Wee are happie above thought, because 'bove merrit." But Flamineo's response arrests this flow of verse with sudden staccato prose:

'bove merrit! wee may now talke freely: 'bove merrit! what ist you doubt? her coynesse? thats but the superficies of lust most women have; yet why should Ladyes blush to heare that nam'd, which they do not feare to handle? O they are polliticke, They know our desire is increas'd by the difficultie of injoying; [whereas] satiety is a blunt, weary and drowsie passion -- if the buttery hatch at Court stood continually open their would be nothing so passionat crouding, nor hot suit after the beverage --

(I, ii, 17-24)

The illusion of ideal love is abruptly deflated. Flamineo's service to Brachiano is the prostitution of his sister, and Vittoria, behind her facade of modesty, is compliant. Like all women, she knows the game of whetting sexual appetite. "Her jealous husband" is a feeble, impotent fool, an incitement to adultery rather than a deterrent.

Thus Flamineo gives us a moral estimate of the affair round which the play revolves. He strips down the illusion of romantic passion and exposes the sordid reality. His expansion of Vittoria's

case to that of "most women," his reduction of great love to physical hunger, his image of the greedy swarming court, all reinforce the impression of hypocrisy and licence established in Scene One and develop it in terms of sexual depravity. But in contrast to the bitter vehemence which indicates Lodovico's complete entanglement in the ways of this world, Flamineo's tone is one of amused and cynical detachment. He has, it seems, a realistic view of the motives of courtly life, and he ridicules them in the downright fashion of the Elizabethan satirist. But the satirist's customary intention is to warn and reform; what therefore do we make of Flamineo who is simultaneously prompt as lightning to Brachiano's service?

To these contradictory attitudes is added another: his response to Cornelia's frenzied denunciation of adultery. In a conventional sentence she postulates the first serious ethical standard:

The lives of Princes should like dyals move,
Whose regular example is so strong,
They make the times by them go right or wrong.
(I, ii, 279-281)

Yet this is by no means the corollary to Flamineo's satiric deflation of Vittoria, for he turns on Cornelia's moral fervour a much more testy contempt ("What fury rais'd thee up? . . . So, have you done?"). To her "What? because we are poore, /Shall we be vitious?" he returns all the bitterness of neglected ability in a world where venality is the only path to preferment, and preferment the only path to a precarious security. The alternative is pain and poverty, "the gallies, or the gallows." In the face of oppression the usual standards of human behaviour become meaningless, and Flamineo's cruelty to his mother is

a denial of all normal feeling:⁶

I would the common'st Courtezan in Rome,
Had bene my mother rather than thy selfe.
Nature is very pittifull to whoores
To give them but few children, yet those children
Plurality of fathers -- they are sure
They shall not want.

(I, ii, 328-333)

Flamineo's first scene, therefore, presents us with a series of startlingly diverse facets. Webster's way of integrating these is rudimentary. He sets down briefly the determining factors of Flamineo's life:

My father prov'd himselfe a Gentleman,
Sold al's land, and like a fortunate fellow,
Died ere the money was spent. You brought me up,
At Padua I confesse, where I protest
For want of meanes, the University judge me,
I have bene faine to heele my Tutors stockings
At least seven yeares: Conspiring with a beard
Made me a Graduate -- then to this Dukes service --
I visited the Court, whence I return'd
More courteous, more letcherous by farre,
But not a suit the richer.

(I, ii, 310-320)

It makes enough sense. Flamineo's view of life is born of hard circumstance and grovelling indignity, of painful dissatisfaction with all men and institutions -- especially with those great men whose luxurious whims govern his chances of advancement. Virtuous service is a waste of time; what does Marcello receive but "a poore handfull? --"

Which in thy palme thou bear'st, as men hold water --
Seeking to gripe it fast, the fraile reward
Steales through thy fingers.

(III, i, 43-45)

Webster's psychological reasoning is this: that malcontent disillusion fosters exclusive self-concern and total lack of feeling for others.

Living to himself alone, Flamineo will take any means, however base, to preferment. Thus the static traits of the malcontent are combined with the pragmatism of the machiavel:⁷ the former is the source of his cynical detachment and the satiric perception to which no value, no attitude, no pose is invulnerable; the latter the ground of his activity and intrigues. His view of life is his motivation: the critic is father to the actor. But he takes "crooke bendings beneath forced bankes." That intelligence and ability in low circumstances must take devious ways "to finde out the Ocean" denotes disorder in the human situation as a whole.

Thus Flamineo is made to carry over from Scene One into his own life and character the sense of moral chaos, of a world of injustice and insecurity and dog-eat-dog.⁸ In his situation he embodies its insecurity; in his egoistic ambition he embodies its ruthlessness and venality. Abstracting himself from any kind of emotion, he assents to the vicious reality of the courtly world, and with complete intellectual awareness he plays what is, to him, the only game possible -- the varying of shapes. Knaves do grow great by being great men's apes, and so his "loyalty" to Brachiano is limitless. He is secretary, then pander, then hired murderer; and to protect himself he acts knave and madman and quaint philosopher. But all the while his self-conscious, mocking intelligence must continually expose the sordid actuality of corruption behind every fair show. The moral hypothesis is futile in a cut-throat world where selfish appetite is the common motivation. Flamineo leaves us without an ethical norm; his mind plays destructively on everything it encounters, because to

him every human concern is simply further evidence of vanity and corruption. These last are the only "norms" he knows.

One more question arises at this point. Professor R.W. Dent has observed that "What [Flammineo] says is often unwise, practically speaking."⁹ Indeed his destructiveness seems at times perilously rash: why does he disillusion Brachiano about Vittoria's virtue when the Duke's passion is the means to his preferment? How does Webster accommodate this tendency in the character, psychologically? Flammineo's verbal bravado can be seen as a projection of energy by a man whose realism is grounded in a sense of ultimate futility. Mankind is rotten and life so bitterly precarious that the turbulent, tactless spirit may as well have its say. In the meantime, the gamble for pleasure may also be made. Yet the persistence of ambition indicates the presence of a more positive impulse, the tenacious hope that security is in fact attainable. In Flammineo, therefore, Webster plausibly juxtaposes a philosophy of death and an instinct for life. What is his purpose in doing this? It seems that, behind the multi-directional satire which argues futility, he is positing the hope that perhaps some value exists which will stand against attack. Flammineo's incessant ironies are in effect a systematic, if cynical, searching out of every possibility -- a kind of quest. If it is possible to see a quest motive behind the commentary which is such an important element in the structure, we have discovered an effective plot principle for the play as a whole.

From this introduction it emerges, I think, that Webster's conception of the character is more complex and significant than critics

have allowed. Certainly Flamineo is more than a hybrid of traditional types, and more than a mere choral device. This much is clear: that as he is diversely constituted, he contains both that objectivity which provides the audience with a useful (though limited) point of view, and at the same time he represents (literally) the corrupt forces which he criticizes. In a world of bewildering deceits his intellectual detachment is the one reliable constant, and we note carefully what observations Flamineo makes all the while. My further point is that the motive which lies behind the commentary and is embodied in the character is of particular significance in clarifying Webster's design. It is necessary now to examine how the character and the attention he commands affect the structure of the play; and in the process the relevance of the quest motive may emerge.

* * *

Flamineo's initially puzzling response to Brachiano, the motivation of which we have now analysed, shows the characteristic pattern of his reactions. He perceives the reality (of lust) behind the illusion (of grand romance) and his satirical comment "places" the action, relating it to the atmosphere of general disorder that has already been established. Whenever we are tempted to give emotional assent to a character or situation, his cynicism undermines our sympathy; he renders suspect all attitudes and stated values and forces a constant modification of response. So with Cornelia -- we see her morality as ineffectual in the courtly world. So with Giovanni -- Flamineo's analogy of the young bird of prey whose "long Tallants . . . will grow out in time," and his

dry observation "He hath his unckles villanous look already," cast doubt on the otherwise sympathetic figure of the child and give an ironic ring to the moral sentences put into his mouth.

The virtuous and their maxims are relatively easy to dispose of, but the heroic villains are drawn with much fuller dramatic conviction, and their magnetism attracts a much stronger response. In each of the scenes between the lovers, therefore, Flamineo provides a "satiric counterpoint"¹⁰ which has the effect of sustaining the audience's critical awareness. Continuing in his first sardonic vein, he mocks the impassioned words of Brachiano ("That's better, she must wear his Jewell lower" -- a salacious leer); he points out the pragmatic purpose of Vittoria's strange dream about the Yew tree:

Excellent Divell.
She hath taught him in a dreame
To make away his Dutchesse and her husband.
(I, ii, 246-248)

Later, in like fashion, he ridicules the strong passions of the quarrel scene. As the lovers upbraid each other he remarks, "Now for two whirlwindes." He encourages the reconciliation and "places" it at the same time with his satiric interpolations:

What a damn'd impostume is a woman's will!
Can nothing break it? . . . fie, fie, my Lord.
Women are caught as you take Tortoises,
Shee must bee turn'd on her backe. Sister, by this hand
I am on your side. Come, come, you have wrong'd her.
What a strange credulous man were you, my Lord,
To thinke the Duke of Florence would love her!
Will any Mercer take anothers ware
When once 't is tows'd and sullied? And yet, sister,
How scurvily this frowardnesse becomes you!
Yong Leverets stand not long; and womens anger
Should, like their flight, procure a little sport;
A full cry for a quarter of an hower;
And then bee put to th' dead quat.
(IV, ii, 152-165)

The lover's suit becomes pursuit of bestial game; Vittoria is merchandize,

"tows'd and sullied," "scurvily" stubborn in mood like the rest of her depraved sex. In this manner Flamineo's commentary ensures that the appearance of heroic love (however powerfully projected) never quite obscures our awareness of the self-indulgent sensuality and unscrupulous ambition on which the liason is based, or of the general rottenness of the society which spawned it.

First of all, therefore, Flamineo's satire is a means of uncovering false pretensions and suspect morality. But he also attacks with relish the patently ridiculous and the patently corrupt. His ribald contempt for the "jealous husband" ("So un-able to please a woman that like a dutch doublet all his backe is shrunke into his breeches") is offset by the zest with which he gulls Camillo, by the garrulous bawdy argument with which, in the shape of solicitous brother, he manipulates the cuckold. His exchanges with Vittoria combine mock-persuasion and satiric aside:

Shall a gentleman so well descended as Camillo -- (a lousy slave that within this twenty yeares rode with the blacke guard in the Dukes cariage mongst spits and dripping-pannes) -- . . . An excellent scholler, (one that hath a head fild with calves braynes without any sage in them), -- come crouching in the hams to you for a night's lodging? -- (that hath an itch in's hams, which like the fier at the glasse house hath not gone out this seaven yeares) -- is hee not a courtly gentleman? -- (when he weares white sattin one would take him by his blacke mussel to be no other creature then a maggot).

(I, ii, 126-127)

This is all at the expense of Camillo, and Vittorio is for a moment his accomplice in mockery -- but that is in itself ironic, for immediately the lash is turned back on her and, again, on womankind:

Come sister, darknesse hides your blush, women are like curst dogges, civilitie keepes them tyed all day time, but they are let loose at midnight, then they do most good or most mischeefe.

(I, ii, 187-190)

The energy of Flamineo's satire, however, reaches its turbulent height in relation to Doctor Julio, the epitome of corruption. He takes a perverse delight in the creature's own vitality:

O thou cursed antipathy to nature -- looke, his eye's bloud-shed
like a needle a Chirurgeon stitcheth a wound with -- let me embrace
thee toad, & love thee ^o thou abhominable lothsome gargarisme, that
will fetch up lungs, lights, heart, and liver by scruples.

(II, i, 303-307)

These illustrations show both the restless energy and the prevailing tone of Flamineo's commentary. The mercurial shifts in direction in his satire contribute to the impression of his "inconsistency"; yet, like his assumed shapes, they are all logically related to a very consistent point of view. Humanity, whether represented by the noblewoman, the cuckold or the knave, is bestial and corrupt (curst dogge, maggot, toad). However narrow this attitude may be, it is the only objective one in the play. The opinions expressed by Francisco and Lodovico are directly allied to their purposes of revenge, but the very imprudence of much of Flamineo's satire, his imperilling of his own interests, in fact guarantees his objectivity. So he provides at least a constant point of focus for the audience.

The attention thus commanded by Flamineo in his capacity as focussing agent affects the structural rhythm of the scenes. Just as his first harangue to Brachiano jars against the preceding speeches, so his comments continually punctuate the flow of dialogue with sardonic deflation. Because the dramatic strength of the heroic protagonists always tempts sympathy, his satire never quite loses its shock-value; the result is that Flamineo enforces a constant readjustment

in attitude, a continual reffocussing. So the action moves along between the heroic and the satiric, surging forward on the themes of passion and revenge, halting abruptly at passages of scurrilous grotesquerie. Flamineo's speeches are sterile in argument: however lively and energetic in texture, they are static and self-contained in relation to the dramatic dialogue,¹¹ and once they deflate its pretensions they leave it no possible development. The movement of the play halts, therefore, with Flamineo's satirical speeches and as it proceeds again the taste of them lingers.

This halting structural rhythm is in an elementary way expressive of the restlessness and insecurity of the courtly world. But the further effect of the attention-stopping passages, harping as they do on depravity and pain and all the grotesque details of Jacobean life, is to create an atmosphere of impinging chaos, a kind of negative frame of reference just behind the action, a framework to which it all relates. This is reinforced of course by the pervasive imagery of poison and disease, of the bestial and the sinister and the horrifying, and by the recurring figures which play on the appearance-reality antithesis.¹² But again it is Flamineo who most often points out the relation of action to framework, of the heroic episodes to the sense of anarchy which becomes increasingly vivid and dominant through the accumulation of motifs.

To summarize briefly: Flamineo is a dramatis persona who, by virtue of his philosophy of life and his volubility, is also a commentator. He provides a point of focus for the theme of anarchy which is the background of the play, and he functions as a device by

which this theme is orchestrated -- that is, by which it is reflected in the rhythm and the language of the play. We should notice, too, a further effect. It is Flamineo who, even while heightening our awareness of this atmosphere, yet keeps it in the background, prevents it from overwhelming the heroic action. The current of humour in his comments gives them a leavening effect as well as a destructive one, and thus renders acceptable much that could be highly objectionable. He has the satirist's delight in his own cynical wit, and communicates it, as he shifts from image to image with his unmistakable relishing of deflation and incongruity. Even as he undercuts the sympathetic response with reminders of foul disorder, he distances that foulness; his speeches, packed with near-comic vitality, induce something of the pleased disengagement of the comic experience. He enforces a horrid awareness, but tempers it in this way with the curious charm of his own mocking eloquence -- a charm rooted in the intelligence and vigour innate but frustrated in the character.

* * *

The attributes of the character who is also commentator thus become meaningful in terms of the play's structure (its language, its rhythm, and its tension between the heroic and the satiric). We gain additional insight by considering, now, Flamineo's symbolic value. As well as exposing anarchy, he is also, by virtue of his counterfeiting activity, identified with it. His symbolic relation to the framework is made explicit in the scene of his "polliticke" madness. It follows directly upon the trial scene, a complex of deception in which good and

evil, truth and falsehood, are confused and indistinguishable.

Flamineseo decides in consequence:

because now I cannot counterfeit a whining passion for the death of my Lady, I will faine a madde humor for the disgrace of my sister, and that will keepe off idle questions.

(III, ii, 314-316)

His decision, apart from indicating his remoteness from normal human emotions, provides an implicit conclusion to the moral anarchy of the trial scene: madness, chaos in the human mind. Appropriately, his words of "distraction" lament "the end of service," the pain that venality brings upon itself, the general corruption of authority:

O Gold, what a God art thou! and ô man, what a devill art thou to be tempted by that cursed Minerall! Yon diversivolt Lawyer; marke him, knaves turne informers, as maggots turne to flies, you may catch gudgions with either. A Cardinall; I would hee would heare mee, theres nothing so holie but mony will corrupt and putrifie it, like vittell under the line.

(III, iii, 19-25)

Yet even as he enacts the conclusion to his way of life, he is carrying out a Machiavellian scheme to preserve it, with the characteristic blend of foulness and vitality. This is a central example of the appearance-reality figure-in-action; again, it is repeatedly reinforced by Flamineseo's minor shapes, by the disguises of Francisco and Lodovico, and by many incidents in the action.¹³ But from the outset Flamineseo so completely compounds the roles of deceiver and critic that his mere presence rapidly becomes sufficient to heighten awareness both of the deceit and the sordid truth behind the deceit. So it is as he observes the ironic denunciation of Isabella; so it is, more subtly, in the trial scene.

Flamineseo's symbolic function is the more interesting because he

is, in fact, in terms of the main action, peripheral. He is the go-between for the lovers, and, briefly, the hired villain; otherwise he hovers round the central conflict of passion and revenge with the sole purpose of promoting or protecting his own interests. But once his value as symbol is established, he might be expected to have a more particular relevance to the central action than has yet emerged. It is important to notice that Vittoria never appears without the accompaniment, whether verbal or silent, of Flamineo. It is mention of her that provokes his first diatribe against women in general;¹⁴ her first major appearance is to the tune of his satirical description of her to Camillo;¹⁵ and her scenes with Brachiano are subject to the counterpoint of deflating comments often directed at womankind and relating to the general corruption.

In the scene of her "Araignment," however, Vittoria's magnetism is certainly dominant; it is her spirited opposition to her sour and prejudiced judges, what Lamb called her "innocent-resembling boldness," that makes that strongest and most disturbing appeal for emotional assent in the play. But our response to her eloquence is modified always by the fact that there also stands Flamineo who represents the sordid truth. The few words he speaks are enough to convey it --

Mon. . . . heare your sentence -- you are confin'd

Unto a house of convertites and your baud --

Fla. Who I? Mon. The Moore.

Fla. O I am a sound man againe.

(III, ii, 272-275)

-- both Vittoria and he are guilty. And any tendency to give too much assent to her heroic performance is tempered also by the way in which the whole Act is constructed. Flamineo's counterfeiting encloses

Vittoria's.¹⁶ The trial is well nigh parodied in the preceding scene of Flamineo's own mock-arraignment by the foolish lawyer, which produces zestful insolence and the explanation, "I do put on this feigned Garbe of mirth, /To gull suspicion." Even the dignity of the grave Lieger Embassadors who will judge Vittoria is distorted by his insolence, and with this introduction it is hardly in doubt that Vittoria's brilliant show of modesty and innocence is "to gull suspicion" also. The following scene of his "distraction" is, as I have already said, the natural conclusion of moral anarchy; and Flamineo's malcontent duet with Lodovico is a contest in disillusionment between two characters who are both critics and actors. It contributes little to the movement of the action but much to the atmosphere, and against this mood the sheer audacity of Vittoria's sham is the more impressive.

After this central set-piece, Flamineo's accompaniment is in the earlier vein -- as in the House of Convertites scene, and again in Act V, where he reduces the value of Vittoria's grief for Brachiano with characteristic generalizations at the expense of womankind:

Fra. How heavily shee takes it. Fla. O yes, yes;
 Had women navigable rivers in their eies
 They would dispend them all; surely I wonder
 Why wee should wish more rivers to the Cittie,
 When they sell water so good cheape. Ile tell thee,
 These are but Moonish shades of greifes or feares,
 There's nothing sooner drie than womens teares.
 (V, iii, 183-189)

Even her treachery to him in the final scene elicits the same mockery of her sex:

How cunning you were to discharge! Do you practise at the Artillery yard? Trust a woman? never, never; Brachiano bee my precedent: we lay our soules to pawne to the Devill for a little pleasure, and a woman makes the bill of sale. That ever man should marry! For one Hypermnestra that sav'd her Lord and husband, forty nine of her sisters cut their husbands throates all in one night. There was a shole of vertuous horse-leeches.

(V, vi, 160-166)

Now, the moral ambiguity of Vittoria is a major critical problem of The White Devil. To Muriel Bradbrook, for instance, her character is morally blurred, too convincingly innocent when we know she is guilty.¹⁷ As befits the title figure, hers are the striking moments of the play, and certainly she makes the most powerful appeal to sympathy. It is the strength of her resistance to satiric deflation that gives the play its moving power, that tension between dubious heroism and satire. On what scale of values are we to judge this heroism? When we trace the positioning of Flamineo beside and around her, and accept his value as symbol, there is no doubt of the philosophical relation of her magnetism to the general pattern of deceit and moral anarchy; her behaviour, for all its appeal, is the prime example of this very pattern.

There is one important point, however, when Flamineo's discordant accompaniment falls into harmony. It is at the moment of death. Much has been written about Webster's preoccupation with death; it is enough here to say that he dwells on it as the ultimate test for all his characters, the final universal trial of life and spirit. And at the crucial moment Vittoria's courage blazes out:

Yes I shall wellcome death
As Princes doe some great Embassadors;
Ile meete thy weapon halfe way.
(V, vi, 220-222)

to which Flamineo responds:

Th'art a noble sister,
I love thee now;
(V, vi, 241-242)

and he adds some sententiae on "masculine vertue."¹⁸

After all the routine of cynicism and abuse of women is Webster here giving us a mechanical volte-face? It is a weakness in the play if this concluding major chord which Flamineo allows us is not in some way prepared for or motivated. Why does he finally give assent when his essential pattern is destructive? At this point we return to the possibility of the quest motive.

The effect of Flamineo's incessant ironies is, as we have seen, to render all poses and positives suspect and relate them to general anarchy. Yet within his scepticism, his "flagrant antinomianism,"¹⁹ is an undeniable savouring through of every experience ("Let me embrace thee, toad . . ."). His speeches may be static and self-contained but the energy within them suggests a restless process of examination. It is a reasonable deduction that Flamineo cuts through appearance and hypocrisy and conventional norms to search out the essential truth about man's condition. Invariably he discovers pain and corruption and no justification besides pleasure of life. His verbal energy is what I shall, for convenience, call his "existentialism,"²⁰ the expression of a frustrated intellect. Flamineo's quest cannot be satisfied by the mechanical sententiae of the conclusion:

Let guilty men remember their blacke deedes,
Do leane on crutches, made of slender reedes.
(V, vi, 302-303)

Giovanni has already been undercut by his cynicism, and the fact that the revenge-murderer Francisco still survives heightens the irony of these lines. It is virtue rather than vice that leans on crutches of slender reeds.

There develops in the final Act a Flamineo sub-plot which we have not yet examined. Its incidents are barely relevant to the main plot and have often been cited as examples of Webster's loose ends, of the lack of coherence in structure. But although they are perhaps out of balance, these scenes contain the clearest hints of the quest motive which gives the play as a whole its real propulsion and tension, and a resolution beyond the reward and punishment motive.

* * *

Act V as a whole is played around the irony of Francisco's masquerade, and it is against this that Flamineo the realist becomes victim to a false sense of security. After the wedding procession his words:

In all the weary minutes of my life,
Day nere broke up till now. This mariage
Confirmes me happy.

(V, i, 1-3)

are followed by the first speeches of sincere praise that he utters:

I have not seene a goodlier personage,
.....
I never saw one in a sterne bold looke
Weare more command, nor in a lofty phrase
Expresse more knowing, or more deepe contempt
Of our slight airy Courtiers. Hee talks
As if hee had travail'd all the Princes Courts
Of Christendome, in all things strives t'expresse,
That all that should dispute with him may know,
Glories, like glow-wormes, afarre off shine bright
But lookt to neare, have neither heat nor light.

(V, i, 6, 31-39)

For a fleeting moment one wonders if some positive value is being established in this character that stands above Flamineo's satire. Mulinassar even receives courtly reward, "a competent pension," from Brachiano. But when the conspirators embrace and reveal their identities we see simply a masterstroke in the counterfeiting game; and Brachiano's generosity is just one of the capricious whims of "men of Princely ranke." Although Flamineo's subsequent advice to Mulinassar is in the old vein, pointing to the general corruption,²¹ and his own goal remains the cynical same ("Give mee a faire roome, yet hung with Arras, and some great Cardinall to lug mee by th'eaes as his endeared Minion"), he is now established as vulnerable, the deceived rather than the deceiver.

In addition, it now becomes clear that for a man of intellect and calculation Flamineo is strangely governed by impulse. It is this characteristic that activates the sub-plot. There is a suggestion of the same facet also in Act III, scene iii, in the quarrel with Lodovico which overrides their malcontent game and shows us, in a moment of sudden violence, another expression of the careless energy Flamineo projects into his restless commentary. The quarrel with Marcello in Act V which arises over the black strumpet Zanche²² likewise draws mockery and violence together. Flamineo's infinite contempt for his virtuous brother and his irritation at Marcello's interference in his affair find expression in a sneering insult to his mother --

I do suspect my mother plaid foule play,
When she conceiv'd thee.

(V, i, 196-197)

-- for which Marcello claims a duel. The impulse on which Flamineo runs Marcello through, undefended, is one of disturbing irrationality. His action appears to be provoked by the brief words between Marcello and Cornelia which he overhears, words which seem to touch off violent resentment and which tempt a metaphysical interpretation:

I have heard you say, giving my brother sucke,
He tooke the Crucifix betweene his hands,
And broke a limbe off.

(V, ii, 11-13)

Why is Flamineo, in the moment of his greatest apparent security, thus prompted to jeopardize it all? This is the antithesis of Machiavellism. He gives no explanation; his silence and impassivity in the face of his mother's confused grief and Brachiano's selfish judgement is chillingly Iago-like. His sentence resolves the theme of courtly reward and punishment:

Hearke you, I will not graunt your pardon. Fla. No?
Bra. Onely a lease of your life. And that shall last
But one day. Thou shalt be forc't each evening
To renew it, or be hang'd.

(V, ii, 72-75)

Flamíneo, defeated by a stroke even he did not anticipate, is confirmed in his philosophy of futility. Yet the life instinct, the curious searching-out of every experience, remains. He is provoked to new, strange notions by the spectacle of Brachiano's delirious ravings and hallucinations. The dying Duke gives us a fantastic image of the devil apparelled in fine raiment, concealing his cloven foot behind "a great rose he weares on's shoe," and to Flamíneo he puts the question, "Doe you not know him?" Flamíneo replies, "No, my Lord." And then we have the weird image of a

performing Flamineo:

See, see, Flamineo that kill'd his brother,
Is dancing on the ropes there: and he carries
A monie-bag in each hand, to keepe him even,
For feare of breaking's necke. And there's a Lawyer
In a gowne whipt with velvet, stares and gapes
When the mony will fall. How the rogue cuts capers!
It should have bin in a halter.

(V, iii, 110-116)

The clever shape-changer and dispassionate critic here dances, one gathers, at the devil's whim. But he does not recognize this "fine slave" in his splendid disguise. His precarious dancing on the ropes is his "loyal" service; the monie-bags to which he clings are the coveted reward; and the preying lawyer proves what Flamineo has always known -- that worldly justice is a mockery indeed. The image suggests that, despite all his intellectual realism, he is the dupe of evil forces and false hopes; and that to think one can benefit from the choice of evil is the ultimate in self-deception.²³ Flamineo, detached and pragmatic, yet killed his brother. When Brachiano names "Flamineo?" once again, he responds in a new vein:

I doe not like that hee names mee so often,
Especially on's death-bed; 'tis a signe
I shall not live long.

(V, iii, 127-129)

Superstition for the moment overcomes rationalism in Flamineo, and establishes the absolute beyond reward and punishment -- death, that which now negates the greatness of Brachiano. Flamineo pursues this new direction of his thoughts:

Uds' death, I would faine speake with this Duke yet.
Fra. Now hee's dead?
Flam. I cannot conjure; but if praiers or oathes
Will get to th'speech of him: though forty devils
Waight on him in his livery of flames,

I'll speake to him, and shake him by the hand,
Though I bee blasted.

(V, iii, 209-215)

For the first time he desires something beyond courtly reward, some new dimension of knowledge. In this mood, he seeks a further stimulus from the spectacle of mourning -- though he still professes cynicism: "Ile discover / Their superstitious howling."

The scene of Cornelia's madness in grief is important as the one interlude in the play where appearance is unequivocally reality. In contrast to Flamineo's mock-madness in which words of truth were spoken, but truth twisted by the falseness of attitude and appearance, Cornelia's distraction produces the simplest perceptions: "You are, I take it the grave maker." She sees death for him, for "h'as handled a toad sure," and Flamineo cannot bear this direct truth: "I would I were from hence." Then comes Cornelia's dirge with its note of the simple way of life and death:

Let holie Church receive him duly
Since hee payd the Church tithes truly.
(V, iv, 101-102)

Flamineo is left to contemplate his own most devious way of life, and the new sensation he has discovered:

I have a strange thing in mee, to th'which
I cannot give a name, without it bee
Compassion.
(V, iv, 107-109)

In the soliloquy which follows he sets beside each other two primary human impulses: the hunger for preferment which has governed his life of service, and conscience, that which he has suppressed and newly recognized:

This night Ile know the utmost of my fate,
 Ile bee resolv'd what my rich sister meanes
 T'assigne mee for my service: I have liv'd
 Riotously ill, like some that live in Court.
 And sometimes, when my face was full of smiles,
 Have felt the mase of conscience in my breast.
 Oft gay and honour'd robes those tortures trie,
 "Wee thinke cag'd birds sing when indeed they crie.
 (V, iv, 110-117)

As he thinks of the reality of pain behind the show of pleasure,
 and of the promptings of conscience, his mind moves to that further
 question which he wished to put to Brachiano.

The ghost is stage machinery; it is, more importantly, the
 expression of Flamineo's emerging concern with conscience and the
 mystery of death. His habitual mocking strain is still self-consciously
 dominant, but beneath it is the anxiety of the agnostic:

In what place art thou? in yon starrie gallerie,
 Or in the cursed dungeon? No? not speake?
 Pray, Sir, resolve mee, what religions best
 For a man to die in? or is it in your knowledge
 To answere mee how long I have to live?
 That's the most necessarie question.
 Not answere? Are you still like some great men
 That onely walke like shadowes up and downe,
 And to no purpose? say: --
 What's that? O fatall! hee throwes earth upon mee.
 A dead man's skull beneath the rootes of flowers.
 (V, iv, 120-130)

The only answer is the inevitable coming of death itself, the mortality
 of all creatures great or mean, the skull beneath the fairest exterior.
 Two alternatives remain: to seek some "religion . . . to die in," a
 means of coming to terms with conscience and death; or to justify the
 hazards of living by taking the utmost from the strumpet Fortune by the
 nearest means -- the Machiavellian, and the existential way. Only in
The Duchess of Malfi does Webster give serious consideration to the former.

For Flamineo the certainty of death rouses the characteristic bravado, and he reasserts his old motive: "I doe dare my fate /To do its worst . . ."; all his ordeals can be justified if only, by "Vittoria's bountie," he can gain reward.

In his searching style, therefore, Flamineo has confronted, examined, and discarded the area of spiritual experience. He re-embraces the corrupt world whose creature and symbol he is, and proceeds in his quest for satisfaction within it. In the final scene he assumes his most audacious shape, in a defiant counterfeiting of death itself, out-mocking the mockery it makes of man. It is the effort par excellence after Vittoria has rejected him to win, somehow. All the constants in his many-faceted being are summarized: his guise is that of the servant faithful to the ultimate service; the weapons of death are sparkling jewels that can scare the devil in Vittoria, just as the prospect of reward has quelled his own sense of the diabolic.²⁴ His mock-agony is savoured with the characteristic relish of details of sensation:

O I smell soote
Most stinking soote, the chimneis a'fire,
My liver's purboil'd like scotch holly-bread;
There's a plumber laying pipes in my guts, it scalds.
(V, vi, 142-145)

When he rises it is to spew out contempt for womankind.

Flamineo, like Vittoria, is vital to the last, fully and defiantly himself. He mocks the gloating Lodovico, spurns his curious "What dost think on?" with

Nothing; of nothing: leave thy idle questions,
I am i'th way to study a long silence,
To prate were idle, I remember nothing.

Thers nothing of so infinit vexation
As mans owne thoughts.

(V, vi, 203-207)

He knows now the answer to "the most necessary question"; he denies "the mase of conscience" in death as in life; the best religion to die in is that of his own being:

I doe not looke
Who went before, nor who shall follow mee;
Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end.
"While we looke up to heaven wee confound
"Knowledge with knowledge.

(V, vi, 256-260)

He has rejected the further dimension of knowledge, of conscience and of the irrational. He is left simply with his self-assertive courage ("Search my wound deeper: tent it with the steele /That made it"), his wry, garrulous mockery which survives to the last:

'Tis well yet there's some goodnesse in my death,
My life was a black charnell: I have caught
An everlasting could. I have lost my voice
Most irrecoverably.

(V, vi, 269-272)

and a certain final equanimity, which emerges even through the nihilism in bitter sententiae:

Wee cease to greive, cease to be fortunes slaves,
May cease to dye by dying.

(V, vi, 252-253)

So what remains when the cycle of courtly ruin has come around? Simply the moments of human brilliance which dominate the impression of any audience or reader -- the splendid amoral spirit of Vittoria deriding her judges, manipulating or upbraiding her lover, defying her executioners. Her magnetism has resisted satiric attack throughout the play and at the end Flamineo allows it to stand. It is the one

positive virtu he acknowledges because he is in accord with it himself; both sustain their essential vitality, "integrity of life," in the face of death.

Here plot and sub-plot, moving tension and quest motive, all coincide. Flamineo's words of assent determine Vittoria's stature and give a resolution, beyond the "deserts" resolution, to the theme which is in fact the principle and controlling motive in the play: the search for some valid human value. The White Devil is an exploration of the condition of man in an evil society where all appearances are suspect and injustice is the one constant; where all life leads to pain and death, and death is a blank finality. It is Flamineo's exploration, for as he is characterized, he bears a significant relationship (explicit, structural, and symbolic) to the vital elements of Webster's universe. He proceeds by destruction and exposure to probe the essence of this unpalatable reality. Though his experience of the irrational and the inexplicable suggests that there is justification in some wider knowledge, he will not confound the certain knowledge he has. He sets the limits of his exploration in the soliloquy in which he rejects the claims of conscience and of man's own thoughts; he accepts evil and anarchy as the norm; he tries to the utmost the life he knows.

It is in Vittoria's final integrity that he finds an affirmation of value. The tension between the heroic and the satiric works to this end. The positive established is the vitality of the ego which raises itself (by whatever means -- the means of the world) above oppression and womanish weakness, and whose courage (or masculine virtue) is a reality

even before death. This is a value outside the conventional scale; Boklund calls it an aesthetic solution.²⁵ Moral dicta are unrealistic and ineffectual in The White Devil; it is a tragedy of worldliness, and its heroism is strictly in the terms of its corrupt society. The fact that Webster touches on ethical and metaphysical problems and then abruptly rejects them in his final resolution creates the sense of untied philosophical threads, of a certain incoherence in the play. Here he touched on these in order to define his ground, but he was interested in the further area. He just began to indicate in Flamineo that choice of evil involves self-deceit. How then does human integrity manifest itself in the spiritual area? What happens to the one thing valid in human nature when it is exposed to an evil more than social, to a diabolic agony of the spirit? This gave Webster the theme for his next play.

III

The Duchess of Malfi, though a disquieting play, is less perplexing than its predecessor. The principle of construction is in fact very similar to that discovered in The White Devil: the heroine is dominant, and again is significantly underscored by a villain-figure whose function is to test her integrity and be an index to the framework of chaos. The courtly setting, the character grouping (the antagonistic camp again consists of Duke and Cardinal), the accumulation of images (particularly on the appearance-reality theme) -- all repeat the earlier design. But the pattern is much clearer in its values because there is an unambiguous protagonist for good. The notions of the Duchess's offence against the social hierarchy and of her wilful passion are embodied in the conflict to make more acceptable the Aragonian intrigue and to humanize the Duchess with a touch of original sin; but there is never any doubt that, against the hypocrisy and cruelty of her brothers, the Duchess is virtue at its most sympathetic. Her ordeal, her struggle with the forces of evil which seek to bring her to despair and spiritual annihilation, is the moral centre of the play.

The critical question here is not of intention but of execution, though of course the two are interdependent. The charge is one of disunity: that the play ends with the death of the Duchess in Act IV; that the last Act is a hopeless anticlimax; at

least that it involves a shift in interest which is fatal to the unity of the play.¹ Once again, giving Webster the benefit of the doubt, one asks whether he simply bungles his ending, or whether there is a sustained motive in the play which justifies its taking this particular form. The last Act, in fact, belongs to Bosola: it is his function therein to wreak vengeance for the Duchess, to show the survival beyond death of her virtue and the confusion of evil. Obviously, the clue to the formal problem lies in this character. To judge Bosola's effectiveness as a structural mentor, we have to examine his constitution and motivation, and particularly his relationship with the Duchess. As in the case of Flamineo, once the reasons for the character's behaviour are understood, the significance of his function in the total design will emerge and one can determine to what extent the final Act is out of balance. The related question is this: if the ending is discovered to be a necessity of the design, why is it felt to be so distinctly unsatisfactory? It may be simply inadequately handled by Webster, or it may be, as a concluding statement, symptomatic of the limitations of his vision.

* * *

Bosola is in certain obvious ways Flamineo's counterpart, and it is illuminating, first of all, to consider how Webster has modified his conception of the character. Again he delineates the malcontent satirist, the "forgotten man" who lashes with cynicism a world in which he sees injustice, pain and mortality as the only constants. On the basis of this view of life Bosola is also the Machiavellian tool-villain,

taking the nearest way to his own advancement, a man who recognizes the hopeless corruption of the world and deliberately participates in it because he believes that that is the only thing possible.

The function of Flamineo in The White Devil is, in effect, to demonstrate the inevitability of this existential philosophy: that in the midst of futility, ethics are meaningless. It is Flamineo who, to persuade us that this is true, focusses the problem of deceptive appearances, who shatters illusions and exposes the fundamental pervasive corruption, who makes all poses suspect and all positives ridiculous. The function of Bosola is at first similarly destructive. His satiric arias in the early Acts are in the mode of Flamineo, jarring against the flow of action and dialogue, concentrating the rottenness of the Websterian world into unsavoury images. And just as Flamineo's satire serves to test and measure the integrity of Vittoria, so it is Bosola's purpose to accompany the Duchess with discords, to test her resources to the utmost, and to grant the validity of her way of life when she outfaces death. To this extent the two villain-figures have parallel roles: they live and act on the same premises, and both search out an ultimate value which is posited in the heroine. Bosola's testing of the Duchess is, however, much more clearly deliberate than Flamineo's of Vittoria, and it is also much more complex. The purpose of Flamineo's quest, his experiment in destruction, is to discover the existential ideal, the most vital human quality in an evil world. Although Bosola initially tries the Duchess with a similar deflating cynicism which only her charm resists, this tension develops into a profoundly searching interaction between

agnosticism and faith. The realm of exploration is quite different.

The difference is this: that whereas Flamineo asserts the validity of the totally self-centred way of life, Bosola is trying to the utmost a possible alternative.² For Flamineo's solution is a patently limited one. Because he and Vittoria are very much creatures of their world, accepting the operating principle of social evil and trying to beat society at its own game, they are ultimately vulnerable; they are themselves extinguished by Machiavellian deception. Even Vittoria's stoic defiance, the one quality which survives Flamineo's destruction, is in the end sterile, a back-to-the-wall courage which discovers itself "in a black storm," in a mist. Her integrity is amoral, a kind of Dionysian energy which knows no distinction between good and evil, but is yoked here to the ways of the evil society. Vittoria's courage is part of the anarchy: it does nothing to dispel the final chaos. Through Bosola, Webster is seeking another possible solution, in the resources of human virtue.

How does Webster develop the character to accommodate an interest in the possibility of virtue? He returns to the point where Flamineo, in his pondering of Brachiano's death, touched for a moment on the concept of conscience, and suggested the existence of a metaphysical principle which would counter the absolute power of death. Flamineo chose to reject conscience and sought his answer in worldly terms; but Webster left some memorable lines and images to indicate that he was self-deceived in his philosophy.³ It is this psychological area that is crucial in the conception of Bosola. He is presented as a man who lives by the existential creed, but is fundamentally moral in

sensibility. He rationalizes away his moral scruples, but the possibility of conscience is always present.

These new dimensions in the character affect the tonal framework of the play, to which he is an index. Bosola's disillusionment seems deeper than Flamineo's; his commentary has a more morbid, brooding note and lacks the current of exuberant humour. Thus, while Bosola accepts and criticizes the same society, while he himself represents its corruption, his criticism is in a somewhat different vein: beyond the raillery against deception and injustice and general depravity, there is a stronger awareness of the bestiality in man, and of mortality and decay. Allied with the obtrusive bestial imagery which surrounds Ferdinand, Bosola's sardonic allusions suggest an atmosphere of evil wider than that in The White Devil. The language patterns that emerge connote something more sinister, a destructiveness beyond human comprehension.

In The Duchess of Malfi, therefore, the world of the play is different. In the earlier play, social evil and death were the boundaries of the characters' experience. Now Webster's vision of life is even darker; evil is not explicable in terms of social oppression, however severe, but with its lack of specific motivation (in the Aragonian brethren), its association with madness and the non-human, it borders on the diabolic. The condition of humanity in a world of natural evil is Webster's problem now.⁴ In The White Devil, such virtue as existed was ineffective and dubious, and even the positive of defiance was confounded by the final mist. The possibility that remains belongs to that area of experience which Flamineo excluded but which still exists in

Bosola. What happens in this world to the man or woman who lives by conscience and has also, unlike Isabella or Marcello, the energy that distinguished Vittoria? So the Duchess, set in this fearful context, represents the trial of virtue.

Bosola, as investigator of her integrity, combines a profoundly challenging scepticism with the potentiality for conversion. His ambiguity is a thematic necessity: on the one hand, his cynicism determines his commitment to the corrupt world and his employment against the Duchess, while on the other, his unquiet conscience impels the development of sympathy in him. In the Duchess, Bosola encounters something radically different from all his bitter experience, and in persecuting her, he is, beyond the necessity of his employment, seeking an answer to the problem of his own psyche.⁵ His function as commentator is confined to the early part of the action, where the dominant mood of the Duchess's world is established. (Thereafter the language patterns are carried in the general dialogue, and particularly in the speeches of Ferdinand and the Madmen.) As Bosola becomes an integral part of the Duchess's ordeal, he assumes symbolic dimensions more complex than Flamineo's; and as the psychological basis of this function and of his subsequent conversion, the interplay of conscience and egoism in him is of central importance. Bosola's dilemma is Webster's; it embodies the argument of the play. So again, the quest for meaning of the malcontent villain is the essential plot. It is crucial therefore that Bosola, even more than Flamineo, be acceptable as a character, that his ambiguity be credible; otherwise he is merely a conglomeration of traditional and mechanically symbolic

elements, and his conversion (the critical point in the play, formally) would be unconvincing.

* * *

The change in scope from The White Devil to The Duchess of Malfi is immediately noticeable. In the first scene the dialogue between Antonio and Delio serves something of the same purpose as the first scene of The White Devil, being a kind of overture which characterizes the world of the play. Both of these figures continue throughout to offer comments which become part of the tonal framework of words and images: here they give us the essentials. What Antonio's opening speech establishes is that, despite the existence "Of flattring Sicophants, of dissolute, / And infamous persons," of "Death . . . diseases . . . corruption" (all the elements of Flamineo's world), it is possible "To reduce both State, and People / To a fix'd Order." It has been done in France. He points out the responsibility of courtly personages, their potential for "great good or else great harme":⁶

a Princes Court
Is like a common Fountaine, whence should flow
Pure silver-droppes in generall: But if't chance
Some curs'd example poyson't neere the head,
"Death, and diseases through the whole land spread.
(I, i, 12-16)

The first essential for the good prince is a just government, "A most provident Councell, who dare freely / Informe him the corruption of the times." Upon this Bosola enters. He is identified immediately as "the only Court-Gall," a jealous critic who

. . . rayles at those things which he wants,
Would be as lecherous, couvetous, or proud,

Bloody, or envious, as any man,
If he had means to be so.

(I, i, 26-29)

Here we have a glimpse, by implication, of characteristic court behaviour; and we know, without the lengthy self-explanation of Flamineo, that Bosola is a bitter and disappointed man. We learn the reason immediately, as he accosts the Cardinal:

I have done you better service then to be slighted thus: miserable age, where onely the reward of doing well, is the doing of it!

(I, i, 32-34)

Bosola's disillusionment stems from his "neglect," his obsession with the problem of merit and reward. Thus, offsetting Antonio's description of the fair court of France, he points to the unscrupulousness of the courtly powers in present view ("I fell into the Gallies in your service"). As Antonio warned, corruption in high places infects like poison in a spring; and Bosola's verbal scowl at the evil in the Cardinal is extended to a repulsive diatribe on the natural rottenness of the Aragonian pair and their sycophants:

Some fellowes (they say) are possessed with the divell, but this great fellow, were able to possesse the greatest Divell, and make him worse.

Ant. He hath denied thee some suit?

Bos. He, and his brother, are like Plum-trees (that grow crooked over standing-pooles) they are rich, and ore-laden with Fruite, but none but Crowes, Pyes, and Catter-pillers feede on them: Could I be but one of their flattring Panders, I would hang on their eares like a horse-leach, till I were full, and then droppe off.

(I, i, 45-54)

Yet Bosola himself would be as unscrupulously ambitious as any. He elects to exploit evil and is thus identified with it.

Antonio's commentary on the entrance of the court supplements Bosola's harangue and points to the sham which conceals corruption. The gallantry of the Cardinal is a mere pose:

Such flashes superficially hang on him, for forme; but observe his inward Character: he is a mellancholly Churchman: The Spring in his face, is nothing but the Ingendring of Toades.

(I, i, 157-160)

As for Ferdinand,

The Duke there? a most perverse, and turbulent Nature --
What appears in him mirth, is meerely outside,
If he laugh hartely, it is to laugh
All honesty out of fashion.

(I, i, 169-172)

They are twins "In qualitie," forces of oppression and injustice.

The Cardinal, "Where he is jealious of any man . . . laies worse plots for them, than was ever impos'd on Hercules: for he strewes in his way Flatterers, Panders, Intelligencers, Athiests, and a thousand such politicall Monsters"; while his brother

. . . speakes with others Tongues, and heares mens suites
With others Eares: will seeme to sleepe o'th bench
Onely to intrap offenders, in their answeres;
Doombes men to death, by information,
Rewards, by heare-say.

(I, i, 175-179)

In Delio's conclusion,

the Law to him
Is like a fowle blacke cob-web, to a Spider --
He makes it his dwelling, and a prison
To entangle those shall feede him.

(I, i, 180-183)

These princes personify deception and the abuse of power; and the association with toads, devouring spiders and the foul black cobweb, suggests an entanglement of natural evil which reinforces Bosola's speech.

These are the limits of the world of the play: evil and injustice rule, as in Lodovico's world, but the "almes" can be different, as they are in France.⁷ The evil is darker and more unfathomable, but

it is not unrelieved. Antonio's panegyric on the Duchess closes the overture. Whatever is perceived of dramatized prejudice here in retrospect, his words nonetheless establish a point of light in the darkness, a life force that counteracts disease, an exemplary virtue:

whilst she speakes,
 She throwes upon a man so sweet a looke,
 That it were able to raise one to a Galliard
 That lay in a dead palsey; and to doate
 On that sweete countenance: but in that looke,
 There speaketh so divine a continence,
 As cuts of all lascivious, and vaine hope.
 Her dayes are practis'd in such noble vertue,
 That sure her nights (nay more her very Sleepes)
 Are more in Heaven, then other Ladies Shrifts.

(I, i, 198-207)

The situation now symbolically established through the moral contrast between the Duchess and her brothers (the dominance of evil but the existence also of virtue) gives a framework quite different in scope from the one of unmitigated evil in The White Devil. From this point on, the two sides are played against each other to the ultimate destruction of both: evil destroys good, but destroys itself as well.⁸ But in the general decline into darkness the possibility that virtue is creative is sustained by Bosola, whose movement between the two sides is the key to Webster's meaning.

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The division in the character of Bosola is indicated in Antonio's second comment on him, which is in apparent contradiction to his first. Initially he cites Bosola as a symptom of court corruption; later he says:

'Tis great pittie
 He should be thus neglected -- I have heard

He's very valiant; This foule mellancholly
Will poyson all his goodnesse.

(I, i, 75-78)

The idea of goodness in the envious Court-Gall is not readily acceptable. But Antonio explains, "want of action /Breeds all blacke malecontents." Bosola is thus presented as a man of courage with an untried potential for good who has, after misuse of his ability and long neglect, let his rankling grievances fester and poison his better qualities.

His reaction to Ferdinand's offer of "employment" against the Duchess illustrates immediately this postulated ambiguity. "It seems you would create me /One of your familiars. . . a very quaint invisible Divell, in flesh: /An Intelligencer."⁹ Bosola perceives immediately the viciousness of the bribe, the calculated temptation to "preferment," and responds:

Take your Divels
Which Hell calls Angels: these curs'd gifts would make
You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor,
And should I take these, they'll'd take me to Hell.

(I, i, 285-288)

But the promised "higher place" is not hypothetical, it is actual (there is a place, that I procur'd for you /This morning: the Provisor-ship o'th' horse"), and a temptation thus concrete Bosola cannot resist. Yet he does not admit that he is simply succumbing; he pretends that he is caught without choice:

I would have you curse your selfe now, that your bounty
(Which makes men truly noble) ere should make
Me a villaine: oh, that to avoid ingratitude
For the good deed you have done me, I must doe
All the ill man can invent.

(I, i, 295-299)

It becomes clear that the dichotomy in Bosola is between moral perception and selfish will.¹⁰ He is a man intelligent enough to judge disorder, but too egoistic to let his judgement impair his own advancement. For the same reasons as those fully explained by Flamineo (personal experience of oppression and injustice, which produces total disillusionment), Bosola believes in the inevitable triumph of evil; he is convinced that the virtuous only suffer without justification, and that the one way to preferment is the Machiavellian way, the employment and service of evil. Yet his inclination to virtue makes him judge evil devices for what they are. Because his conscience cannot live with his actual willing subscription to the code of corruption, he rationalizes. He has not the honesty (as Flamineo had) to confess his total egoism, so he makes believe he has no alternative. In fact the ways of evil hold a certain fascination for him, for he picks up Ferdinand's instructions on intelligencing with some relish,¹¹ though he finishes with a statement of self-disgust:

what's my place?
The Provisor-ship o'th horse? say then my corruption
Grew out of horse-doong: I am your creature.
(I, i, 311-313)

To counterfeit is more his profession than he will admit, for his corruption really grows out of his own paralysis of moral will,¹² his pretence that virtue weighs against egoism in him, when actually it is willing selfishness that renders conscience impotent.¹³ One of Webster's major preoccupations in the play, therefore, becomes Bosola's discovery of the consequences of self-deceit.

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The functional value of Bosola's divided constitution is obvious. On the one hand, as the disappointed servant with bitter knowledge of courtly deception and the deep-rooted grievance of the intelligent man born with the odds against him, he (like Flamineo) is a natural organ of malcontent cynicism, a relentless perceiver of corruption and inevitable decay behind all things. It is Bosola's voice that probes behind appearances, that stresses the court's depravity and the skull beneath the skin.

The satiric episode at the beginning of Act II focusses all the themes of the tonal framework. Bosola's ridicule of Castruchio's desire to be "an eminent Courtier" is court-satire directed against the capricious administration of justice, in which no appearance is what it seems and oppression is the hallmark of worldly greatness:

when you come to be a president in criminall causes, if you smile upon a prisoner, hang him, but if you frowne upon him, and threaten him, let him be sure to scape the Gallowes.

Cast. ...but how shall I know whether the people take me for an eminent fellow?

Bos. I will teach a tricke to know it -- give out you lie a-dying, and if you heare the common people curse you, be sure you are taken for one of the prime night-caps --

(II, i, 9-12, 17-21)

The entrance of the old midwife extends Bosola's harangue to the subject of general rottenness, from the "scurvy face-physicke" which covers physical foulness, to the repulsive materials of her face-painting ("the fat of Serpents; spawne of Snakes, Jewes spittle, and their yong children's ordures"). Foulness concealed by fouler means: that is the tenor of his argument, and from it he moves to contemplate the bestiality, decay and mortality of the human body:

What thing is in this outward forme of man
 To be belov'd? we account it ominous,
 If Nature doe produce a Colt, or Lambe,
 A Fawne, or Goate, in any limbe resembling
 A Man; and flye from't as a prodegy.
 Man stands amaz'd to see his deformity,
 In any other Creature but himselfe.
 But in our owne flesh, though we beare diseases
 Which have their true names onely tane from beasts,
 As the most ulcerous Woolfe, and swinish Meazeall;
 Though we are eaten up of lice, and wormes,
 And though continually we beare about us
 A rotten and dead body, we delight
 To hide it in rich tisew -- all our feare,
 (Nayall our terrour) is, least our Phisition
 Should put us in the ground, to be made sweete.
 (II, i, 47-62)

The farce of human pretensions when rottenness is a constant reality, the futility of the fair show as all men descend to dust: such are the sentiments that set the atmosphere of the play. Concentrated here, these themes are repeated throughout in word and action. Bosola speaks of the misery of hell suffered by those who wait eternally upon reward: they exist on a level beneath "hawkes, and dogges."¹⁴ He reduces the study of "Phisiognomie" to a contemplation of disease and depravity.¹⁵ He emphasises the repulsive aspect of the Duchess's pregnancy.¹⁶ These, together with numerous references to lechery, pain, disease, venality, all combine to devalue human life to the point of futility.

All these themes find reinforcement also in the action.

Bosola himself is a wretch suffering eternally in vain hope of recognition; the sub-plot of the wanton Julia illustrates sexual depravity; and Ferdinand of course in his growing madness is the embodiment of bestiality, an evil beyond human reckoning. Most markedly, the theme of false appearances is a design in itself. On Ferdinand's advice, Bosola is to garb

himself in melancholy, to divert suspicion; the Duchess and Antonio are forced into deceit; Ferdinand feigns tolerance, Bosola feigns sincerity, the Duchess feigns a pilgrimage; wax models give the semblance of death -- and so on until the pattern of deception, set against the absolutes of decay and mortality, makes the pervasive mood one of intense futility.

For this tonal framework Bosola sets the key, and much of his behaviour exemplifies its relevance. This is the role of the disappointed malcontent and the self-deceiving egoist. The functional value of his other facet, conscience, and the ambiguity involved, are already clear. Reasons of bitter necessity (Bosola would believe) bind him to the Machiavellian world of the Aragonian brothers, but sympathy draws him to the Duchess; and thus divided he hovers as a go-between, able to carry out the task of persecution with both mockery and compassion, testing for himself the resources and endurance of virtue. His movement thereafter from one side to the other, the resolution of his exploration, should be philosophically decisive in the play. But the devotion of a whole Act to the aftermath might suggest that the resolution for Bosola is less neat and simple, tainted perhaps by the problematic nature of his character. If Act V is a meaningful extension of the quest idea, an examination of the power of virtue to transform the corrosive evil of the world, then the Act may be justifiable, even organic. But in order to make a judgement, we have to examine in detail the relationship which constitutes the quest proper.

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Bosola's relationship with the Duchess progresses in three movements and comprises many counterfeit "shapes." Initially he is the malcontent-turned-intelligencer waiting, "like a polittique dormouse" behind his "old garbe of melencholly," to betray her. In this role, with Flamineo-like earthiness, he subjects "the spirit of woman" in the Duchess to crude exposure (though with little of Flamineo's self-delighting humour; Bosola has the sourness of conscience not abandoned but only compromised). His unpleasant description of the Duchess's pregnancy follows pointedly upon his meditation on the rottenness of the human body. His remarks are either sly insinuations or caustic asides,¹⁷ and have the effect of emphasising the "womanish" weakness here shown in the Duchess, in her impatience and fitful appetites. Her essential virtue is not in doubt, but her unorthodox marriage has involved her in deception; and the whole unbecoming episode of the apricocks ripened in horse-dung shows her vulnerability to satiric attack when her greatness is compromised. Bosola's comments objectify her distraction and heighten her indignity; his conclusion inevitably reduces her to the bestial level: So, so: ther's no question but her teatchines and most vulterous eating of the Apricocks, are apparent signes of breeding --
(II, ii, 1-3)

And human dignity is further undermined by the woman's shriek which is all we hear of the Duchess for the rest of Act II. The spirit of woman is here in ascendance over the spirit of greatness,¹⁸ and Bosola's attacks are successful, reinforced too by his discourse on the depravity of women in general.¹⁹

Ferdinand's reaction to Bosola's "parcell of Intelligency" moves the conflict to a different level:

I would have their bodies
 Burn't in a coale-pit, with the ventage stop'd,
 That their curs'd smoake might not ascend to Heaven:
 Or dippe the sheetes they lie in, in pitch or sulphure,
 Wrap them in't, and then light them like a match:
 Or else to boile their Bastard to a cullise,
 And giv't his leacherous father, to renew
 The sinne of his backe.

(II, v, 88-95)

His words produce a sense of frightening disproportion between offence and retribution: his mind becomes the vehicle of distempered evil, and Bosola is made its instrument. At this point culpable human weakness in the Duchess is transformed to martyred innocence, and Bosola's employment becomes more than rationalized Machiavellism. In Act II he made trial of her appetites to make womanish weakness betray itself; in Act III he begins to make trial of the resources of her soul.

Bosola's exchange with Ferdinand in Act III, scene i, indicates that the Duchess has roused his speculative curiosity and that her motivation eludes him. Like Flamineo, in areas of uncertainty he resorts to superstition:

I do suspect, there hath bin some Sorcery
 Us'd on the Duchesse

 To make her doate on some desertless fellow,
 She shames to acknowledge.

(III, i, 77-81)

The Duchess therefore leads Bosola directly to that area of speculation from which Flamineo turned away, that which is inexplicable in terms of disillusioned realism. For the possibility of selfless emotion still escapes Bosola's comprehension; he sees lechery, venality and ambition as the only bases for relationships. Ferdinand's vanity accords well enough with his understanding of the world, and he can judge him readily

("you /Are your owne Chronicle too much: and grosly /Flatter yourselfe").

But the prolonged passion of the Duchess is outside his experience, and an academic interest in defining it is as strong as egoistic ambition in overcoming conscience. At any rate, his excuse that he is unable to escape Ferdinand's employment becomes palpably weaker, for conscience is no further roused as the fanatical nature of the employment emerges. To be the Duchess's tormentor was not in the intelligencing assignment.

The tonal contrast in Act III, scene ii, between the passage of domestic happiness and the intrusion of Ferdinand with poniard and foul and violent words,²⁰ identifies the Duchess and Antonio as natural innocents.²¹ It is still, however, a scene which opens with references to disorder and darkness:

Dutch. ... you are a Lord of Misse-rule.

Ant. Indeed, my Rule is onely in the night.

(III, ii, 9-10)

Such is the wilderness ventured into by the Duchess in her offence against hierarchical order. Her princely rank makes the state of natural innocence untenable, and to maintain her private illusion she must lie and deceive like the rest of her corrupt world:

O misery, me thinkes unjust actions

Should weare these masques, and curtaines; and not we.

(III, ii, 191-192)

What Bosola sees now in her desperate fabrication about Antonio's treachery is the deceiving practice he understands, employed by virtuous impulse which he does not understand, and the combination intrigues him ("Strange: this is cunning"). Working from careful observation of the Duchess and her slandering officers, he tries to discover her motivation -- shrewdly, as in the apricock affair, but here exploiting emotion, not

appetite.

It is at this point that Bosola shifts from Flamineo-like malcontent consistency to something new in Websterian shape-changing (perhaps nearest in kind to Vittoria's convincing display of innocence):

Let me shew you, what a most unvalu'd jewell,
You have (in a wanton humour) throwne away,
To blesse the man shall find him.

(III, ii, 228-230)

The note of genuine sympathy in his defence of Antonio comes perhaps from his own obsession with the merit-reward question,²² and from his own experience of injustice. His words are persuasive enough; they break down the Duchess's guard and she confirms his suspicion: "This good one that you speake of, is my husband." But that the honest Antonio should be recognized by the Duchess for his honesty is a cause of genuine amazement to Bosola. By this fact she becomes extraordinary:

Do I not dreame? can this ambitious age
Have so much goodnes in't, as to prefer
A man, meerely for worth: without these shadowes
Of wealth and painted honors? possible?

(III, ii, 318-321)

But to Bosola this goodness is freakish. It does not alter his own view of the world; the advice he gives the Duchess ("to faigne a Pilgrimage") is only to ensure her most effective ruin. Conscience and self-disgust flicker in him, but do not modify the central egoistic impulse and the conviction that only by serving evil can he be preferred:

what rests, but I reveale
All to my Lord? oh this base quality
Of Intelligencer! why, every Quality i'th'world

Preferres but gaine, or commendation:
 Now for this act, I am certaine to be rais'd,
 "And men that paint weedes, (to the life) are prais'd.
 (III, ii, 374-379)

Bosola's revelation is made against an imagistic background of bestiality, violence, disease and supernatural evil²³ -- a clear identification of the death world in which he has chosen to participate. Here the role of intelligencer ceases; and without even a murmur from his hypocritical conscience (simply "I will"), Bosola accepts further employment. If we are not now to dismiss with complete scepticism the possibility of genuine conscience in the character, we have to see in his ready adoption of a new role a further motive: compulsive interest in what is, to him, a new aspect of human nature. Delio gives some suggestive information in this scene, when Silvio asks him, "What's that Bosola?"

I knew him in Padua, a fantasticall scholler,
 Like such, who studdy to know how many knots
 Was in Hercules club, or of what colour Achilles beard was,
 Or whether Hector were not troubled with the tooth-ach --
 He hath studdied himselfe halfe bleare-ei'd, to know
 The true semitry of Caesars nose by a shooing-horne,
 And this he did
 To gaine the name of a speculative man.
 (III, iii, 50-57)

This is surely an intentional indication of his immediate motive. As a would-be "speculative man," Bosola has the habit of academic interest in the extraordinary or unknown detail. This is very different from Flamineo's restless savouring of the essence of every experience; Bosola's is a much more deliberate and eccentric curiosity. But it is acceptable as a further facet of the brooding malcontent; it explains the nature of his interest in the Duchess, and it still allows the possibility of dormant virtue behind his rationalized villainy.

The Pilgrim's commentary in Act III, scene iv, summarizes the Duchess's situation at this transitional stage between culpable behaviour and martyrdom:

who would have thought
So great a Lady, would have match'd her selfe
Unto so meane a person? yet the Cardinall
Beares himselfe much too cruell.

(III, iv, 24-27)

The Duchess's own words cite the standard of nature which is denied her:

The Birds, that live i'th field
On the wilde benefit of Nature, live
Happier than we; for they may choose their Mates,
And carroll their sweet pleasures to the Spring.

(III, v, 25-28)

The forces against her are "much too cruell": yet the innocence of nature is not the property of those who possess the responsibility of worldly greatness, and it is womanish weakness in the Duchess to think that it can be otherwise. In resigning herself to the prospect of suffering, she acknowledges her error:

yet (O Heaven) thy heavy hand is in't.
I have seene my little boy oft scourge his top,
And compar'd my selfe to't: naught made me ere
Go right, but Heavens scourge-sticke.

(III, v, 92-95)

The ordeal ahead is one of purification through suffering, of overcoming the spirit of woman with that of greatness; of discovering her proper integrity and asserting it in the world without being compromised by the world's deceiving ways.

In this process Bosola is the fascinated minister: his function is to try the Duchess with the most extreme mockery of existence, to "bruise" to the utmost in order to elicit proof of

human greatness.²⁴ He is the speculative man intent on probing the extraordinary, the virtue which responds to merit; he seeks to discover the fundamental nature of virtuous being in the Duchess, to test its endurance against the constants of oppression, pain and death. As hired tormentor, he delivers increasing agonies. But because there is a sympathetic virtue dormant in himself, even as he attacks her greatness he rallies it, and at moments of greatest despair revives it.²⁵ He performs for the Duchess the symbolic role of heaven's scourge-stick. As he carries out this role, the operation of the various elements of his character, and the heightening of these into various symbolic guises, give the clearest indication of the direction of the quest.

Bosola comes before the Duchess anonymous, vizarded, to deliver objective judgement: she has indulged a foolish illusion.²⁶ To the Duchess he is a "Divell . . . that counterfeits heavens thunder." Representative of diabolic forces and shape-changer he is; she is still too much the woman to respond to the higher challenge embodied in him. Their exchange establishes the method by which he will test her. In her despair the Duchess approaches hysteria: curses shall be her children's first language. Bosola's rebuke, "Fye (Madam) /Forget this base, low-fellow," in part chides, pointing to her offence against degree, and in part mocks, testing the quality of her love. This indicates in him both malcontent incredulity that one born great can love merit alone, and a probing curiosity about the phenomenon. The Duchess is passionately defensive: "Were I a man: /I'll'd beat that counterfeit face, into thy other."²⁷ What emerges here is the pattern of mockery

and discipline which Bosola serves to the Duchess, and the pattern of her response. Another taunt, and she is reasonable;²⁸ another, and she moves to calm self-justification in the fable of the Salmon and the Dog-fish, and then concludes with philosophical resignation:

But come: whither you please: I am arm'd 'gainst misery:
 Bent to all swaies of the Oppressors will.
 There's no deepe Valley, but neere some great Hill.
 (III, v, 167-169)

Bosola's questions and comments in effect provoke this response, and in the prison scenes he makes the technique into a ritual to strengthen her spirit.

His description of the imprisoned Duchess gives her unqualified respect; it is nearer in tone to Antonio's early eulogy than to any of Bosola's own hitherto detached observations. These are lines of feeling, and they indicate a growth of involvement -- the involvement of a student in the subject of his study:

She's sad, as one long us'd to't: and she seemes
 Rather to welcome the end of misery
 Then shun it: a behaviour so noble,
 As gives a majestie to adversitie:
 You may discern the shape of lovelinesse
 More perfect, in her teares, then in her smiles;
 She will muse foure houres together: and her silence,
 (Me thinkes) expresseth more, then if she spake.
 (IV, i, 4-11)

The Duchess's part is now passive: it is Bosola's part to stimulate her responses, and to prevent her decline into despair. As he carries out his "employment," there is a constant interplay in him between growing sympathy (roused first by the stoicism which he observes and which, like Flamineo, he admires), and watchful curiosity; between the impulse to mitigate her trials and the compulsion to test to the utmost.

The Duchess's spirit is roused to wildness by Ferdinand's

ghastly waxworks. Bosola, in presenting them, attempts to discipline her reaction with philosophical comfort:

He doth present you this sad spectacle,
That now you know directly they are dead,
Hereafter you may (wisely) cease to grieve
For that which cannot be recovered.

(IV, i, 68-71)

But her grief is desperate and suicidal. Bosola's response is a sympathetic effort to rally her self-control with admonition and encouragement ("Come, you must live . . . remember /You are a Christian . . . Things being at the worst, begin to mend"); but the Duchess's death-wish is violent. This spirit is for weakness, escape; it involves despair of life and cannot offer to Bosola's examination a principle of existence:

I account this world a tedious Theatre,
For I doe play a part in't 'gainst my will.

(IV, i, 99-100)

So he changes key from sympathy to mockery, for mockery elicited self-control in her before. He moves back and watches her, objectively: "Now, by my life, I pitty you." He meets her near-hysterical curses with cynical irony ("Oh fearfull! . . . O uncharitable!"), and with the words "Looke you, the Starres shine still," he places the impotence and insignificance of her passion against the detachment and permanence of the universe. But at this point the Duchess is beyond his control. Now compassion and revulsion against her treatment become genuinely active in Bosola, and he requests mercy. The career of Ferdinand's obsession is, however, beyond reason, and his new tortures will try her sanity. Bosola's reaction to this latest assignment combines a strongly revived instinct of conscience with his usual obedience:

Bos. Must I see her againe?

Ferd. Yes. Bos. Never.

Ferd. You must.

Bos. Never in mine owne shape,
That's forfeited, by my intelligence,
And this last cruell lie: when you send me next,
The businesse shalbe comfort.

(IV, i, 158-164)

If his employment requires that he see her, at least he will not torment her with a countenance she knows to be treacherous; and he will use the occasion and the horror to strengthen the spirit he has helped to cast into despair. This is a new form of rationalization: egoism, together with his interest in the phenomenon of the Duchess's behaviour, is thus made compatible with his developing sympathy.

At the beginning of Scene Two the Duchess is still and passive in her despair. There are two dangers: her sanity is precarious in this quietness; and self-indulgent brooding on her suffering threatens her integrity. She seems transfixed, fascinated by her misery:

I'll tell thee a miracle --

I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow.

Th'heaven ore my head, seemes made of molten brasse,

The earth of flaming sulphure, yet I am not mad.²⁹

(IV, ii, 25-28)

She has no spirit of life at all but reclines in self-pity: "Fortune seemes onely to have her eie-sight /To behold my Tragedy." The hideously ironic masque of madmen³⁰ in fact serves to keep her from insanity ("nothing but noyce, and folly /Can keepe me in my right wits, whereas reason /And silence, make me starke mad"); and with this preparation,³¹ Bosola comes to make final trial of her soul. In a series of symbolic roles, he presents her with the knowledge she must come to terms with in order to achieve spiritual greatness. With his combination of satiric mockery and compassionate discipline he guides her "by degrees" to make

each essential psychological move, to ask each "necessarie question," and to accept each answer.

As the aged tombmaker Bosola becomes a symbol of mutability, and personifies his own pessimism. He tells her, "I am come to make thy tombe"; she asks, "do'st thou perceive me sicke?"; he replies, "Yes, and the more dangerously, since thy sicknesse is insensible." Thus he indicates to the Duchess that her decline into self-centred despair is a betrayal of her integrity. Responding to his meaning, she asks the question of her identity -- "Who am I?" Bosola's answer is a complete statement of the contemptus mundi philosophy, and expresses all of his own morbid cynicism; his quest is, how virtue may come to terms with this vision:

Thou art a box of worme-seede, at best, but a salvatory of greene mummey: what's this flesh? a little cruded milke, phantasticall puffe paste: our bodies are weaker then those paper prisons boyes use to keepe flies in: more contemptible: since ours is to preserve earth-wormes: didst thou ever see a Larke in a cage: such is the soule in the body: this world is like her little turfe of grasse, and the Heaven ore our heades, like her looking glasse, onely gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compasse of our prison.

(IV, ii, 123-131)

The response he draws is a question on temporal greatness: "Am not I, thy Duchesse?" His reply is a satiric reduction of rank. The comparison with the milkmaid, the mouse, and the sleepless infant shows the futile pretentiousness, the insignificance, and the disquietude of worldly greatness; yet she asserts: "I am Duchess of Malfy still." This famous cry has been seen as an insistence of vain pride; as a final recognition of the responsibilities of rank; as a crucial statement of identity and sanity. The rhythmic emphasis undoubtedly makes it a moment of climax in which there is definite self-recognition, and the line is the more

effective for its multiple sense. Certainly at this moment the danger of the Duchess's loss of spirit in despair is resolved. But self-recognition and greatness of spirit are not to be confused with vain pride of rank, and it is this note which Bosola quickly tries to purge:

That makes thy sleepes so broken:
 "Glories (like glowe-wormes) afarre off, shine bright,
 But look'd to neere, have neither heate, nor light.
 (IV, ii, 140-142)

She understands: "Thou art very plaine." At this point, her attitude towards living being resolved, Bosola can return to the idea of death. The morbid whimsy of the dialogue on tombs points again to the worldliness and folly of Princes, and brings the Duchess to the question: "Let me know fully therefore the effect /Of this thy dismall preparation." She can view the implements of death with complete self-possession and acceptance:

Let me see it --
 I have so much obedience, in my blood,
 I wish it in ther veines, to do them good.³²
 (IV, ii, 168-170)

Even the womanish Cariola cannot communicate fear.

Now Bosola's shape is that of the bellman, the symbol of prayer and consolation for the condemned; and this role is a projection of his own sympathy. His dirge focusses the atmosphere of the dreadful world in which death is peace and mercy, and preparation for death is as welcome as that for the marriage bed:

Of what is't fooles make such vaine keeping?
 Sin their conception, their birth, weeping:
 Their life, a generall mist of error,
 Their death, a hideous storme of terror --
 Strew your haire, with powders sweete:
 Don cleane linnen, bath your feete,

'Tis now full tide, 'tweene night, and day,
End your groane, and come away.

(IV, ii, 188-197)

Cariola's hysteria tests the Duchess's resolution further, but her serenity is fixed. And she comes to the question of her death herself: "Now what you please, /What death?"

Bosola becomes executioner, symbolising the physical ordeal of death. Now it is his persistent curiosity which expresses itself, as he tries the resources of virtue to the last degree ("Doth not death fright you?").³³ His questions produce in the Duchess a wavering towards fantasy, but ultimately a superb balance; her final request is for death itself, and she renounces life as a vessel of womans-fault:

Bos. Yet, me thinkes,
The manner of your death should much afflict you,
This cord should terrifie you? Duch. Not a whit --
What would it pleasure me, to have my throate cut
With diamonds? or to be smothered
With Cassia? or to be shot to death, with pearles?
I know death hath ten thousand severall doores
For men, to take their Exits: and 'tis found
They go on such strainge geometricall hinges,
You may open them both wayes: any way, (for heaven sake)
So I were out of your whispering: Tell my brothers,
That I perceive death, (now I am well awake)
Best guift is, they can give, or I can take --
I would faine put off my last womans-fault,
I'd not be tedious to you.

(IV, ii, 219-233)

In her last speech the vanity of rank is finally negated, and only the spirit of greatness proper remains:

Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength,
Must pull downe heaven upon me:
Yet stay, heaven gates are not so highly arch'd
As Princes pallaces -- they that enter there
Must go upon their knees.

(IV, ii, 237-241)

Bosola, in this sequence, gives the Duchess an accompaniment which plays a vital part in her progression. In his various shapes, he has presented to her the different truths of existence which she must understand and accept in order to achieve greatness in the face of death. The relationship comprises a series of challenges to her despair, her pride, and her strength of resolution; and her reactions produce self-possession, equanimity, and saintly humility. Bosola's challenges, in the very motion of attack, guide her to greatness: at times rejecting, at times accepting, she both stands independently against him and also gains strength from him.³⁴ Thus Bosola, both of his world and against it, unites his dual nature in ministering to the Duchess: as villain, he embodies the world she overcomes, in its extremity of pain; as critic of that world and agent of sympathy, he can in symbolic shape help her to come to terms with her state of being. In effecting this, he witnesses the ultimate integrity of her spirit, and proves for himself that virtue is a valid principle on which to base one's life. The mist in which Vittoria dies does not shroud the Duchess.

It is now that Bosola's self-honesty is put to its essential test, and this is the point which determines whether another full Act is justified. He has proved to himself that virtue is worth-while. But villainy is easier in the world, and though he judges Ferdinand morally ("Other sinnes only speake; Murther shreikes out"), it rapidly becomes clear that his discovery is purely academic, and that he has not the will to renounce the Machiavellian ways which all his life he has rationalized. It is Ferdinand's rejection of him that is the

crucial point in his conversion. The Duke, in a moment of unbearable clarity, sees what he has done; he proceeds upon hectic self-explanation,³⁵ and from that to revulsion against his instrument: "I hate thee for't." Bosola tensely and carefully tries to reason with him ("Let me quicken your memory: for I perceive /You are falling into ingratitude"), but Ferdinand is approaching madness, that which he would have delivered to the Duchess.³⁶

The sense of total futility with which Bosola is left is much more marked than his compassion on the Duchess's death. It is his first emotional discovery. While he always recognized the fact of conscience, he never wanted to live by it; even when he learned the value of a life based on virtue, he was not ready to discard the habitual mode of "loyalty" which now promised substantial reward; but when, to set against his knowledge of good, he experiences the ultimate futility of serving evil, his realization is emotionally complete. He utters what he has known from the outset:

Your brother, and your selfe, are worthy men;
You have a paire of hearts, are hollow Graves,
Rotten, and rotting others.

(IV, ii, 344-346)

But instead of the sardonic avowal of association, he makes his first statement of self-recognition:

I stand like one
That long hath ta'ne a sweet, and golden dreame.
I am angry with my selfe, now that I wake.

(IV, ii, 349-351)

Yet he makes a last poor effort in the old manner, with the usual, now pathetically dubious qualification in the midst:

Let me know

Wherefore I should be thus neglected? sir,
 I serv'd your tyranny: and rather strove,
 To satisfie your selfe then all the world:
 And though I loath'd the evill, yet I lov'd
 You that did counsell it: and rather sought
 To appeare a true servant, then an honest man.

(IV, ii, 353-359)

Ferdinand's answer is madness: "I'll go hunt the Badger, by Owle-
 light: /T'is a deed of darkness."

Bosola is cornered now. He has absolutely no alternative but to answer conscience. And so he renounces self-deceit ("Off my painted honour!"); problems, he decides, all come from the illusions of human vanity. The Duchess becomes divine to him; yet as she stirs, all he can offer her for comfort are pathetic and hopeless lies.³⁷ His worship of her is born of envy, futility, and the old rationalization:

Oh sacred Innocence, that sweetely sleepes
 On Turtles feathers: whil'st a guilty conscience
 Is a blacke Register, wherein is writ
 All our good deedes, and bad: a Perspective
 That shoves us hell: that we cannot be suffer'd
 To doe good when we have a mind to it!

(IV, ii, 382-387)

In such straits ("My estate is suncke below /The degree of feare") at least there is no consideration left to restrain him from devotion to the posthumous cause of virtue, and attempted recompense. But the efficacy of his conversion, his ability to act positively while the habit of self-deception still clouds his mind -- these are gravely in doubt.

* * *

The controversial Act V, therefore, though it may be an

anti-climactic scuffle of assassinations, is clearly necessary to resolve the story of Bosola. In the roles of intelligencer and tormentor he has been exploring the possibilities of a principle of life dormant in himself, active in the Duchess. On discovering the validity of virtue, he has also been shown the total futility of evil. The combination forces him to the side of virtue, but the forces of evil are still active and unrestrained. Obviously the problem is incompletely worked out. Bosola becomes, in the third phase of their relationship, the Duchess's avenger, the carrier of her virtu.³⁸ The question which is the raison-d'être of Act V concerns the power of virtue to transform in a world pervasively evil. The dubious motivation of Bosola at this point, the general decline towards madness and death, suggest that the transforming power of virtue is very limited indeed.

The Act has good moments -- the echo scene, the madness of Ferdinand ("Strangling in a very quiet death"), the shapeless thing armed with a rake which troubles the Cardinal -- but on the whole it is a clumsily constructed, unnecessarily long-winded epilogue. Its elements can be explained: the depravity of courtly love in contrast to the Duchess's marriage is shown in the Julia episode; uncanny grotesquerie emerges in the Doctor-Ferdinand scene; and certainly the futility implicit in the ways of the courtly world, the moral and emotional chaos behind it, all accumulate to form a final overwhelming mood. Against this we have the small voice of Bosola ("Mercy upon me, what a fatall judgement /Hath falne

upon this Ferdinand!"), mouthing justice and retribution yet caught in sham and deception (of the Cardinal, of Julia), just as he was caught in lies at the Duchess's fleeting revival. The Duchess herself had to learn to assert her integrity without being compromised by the world's deceiving ways; for Bosola the deception continues, though the cause is reversed. There is no change here from the malcontent shape of the early Acts, and the satiric voice has the same orchestrating function:

Phisitians that apply horse-leiches to any rancke swelling, use
to cut off their tailes, that the blood may run through them the
faster: Let me have no traine, when I go to shed blood, least it
make me have a greater, when I ride to the Gallowes.

(V, ii, 348-352)

The transformation in Bosola is not felt. Only his increased sense of insecurity is persuasive:

Oh poore Antonio, though nothing be so needfull
To thy estate, as pittie, Yet I finde
Nothing so dangerous: I must looke to my footing;
In such slippery yce-pavements, men had neede
To be frost-nayld well: they may breake their neckes else.

(V, ii, 365-369)

That he should murder Antonio, not save him, seems the conspiracy of both fate and chance,³⁹ and it confirms his habitual sense of futility: "We are meerely the Starres tennys-balls (strooke, and banded /Which way please them)." It was this philosophy that reinforced his egoistic subscription to evil, and Bosola despairs easily of his purpose of goodness. So he returns, like Flamineo, to himself, though also to his own doubtful knowledge of conscience:

I will not Imitate things glorious,
No more than base: I'll be my own example.

(V, iv, 94-95)

In the last scene he enacts vicious revenge, not only

against the Cardinal and Ferdinand, but also on the innocent bearer of Antonio's body. Against the shrill chorus of farcical courtiers, Bosola, the Cardinal, and Ferdinand muddle into a communal death. Bosola talks still of his cause ("when thou kill'dst thy sister, /Thou tookst from Justice her most equall ballance, /And left her naught but her sword"); yet this is rather in the tone of his protests to Ferdinand about reward,⁴⁰ and the dominant accent is that with which he kills the now mad Duke:

Now my revenge is perfect: sincke (thou maine cause
Of my undoing) -- the last part of my life,
Hath done me best service.

(V, v, 81-83)

He expresses the same personal triumph over the Cardinal:

I do glory
That thou, which stood'st like a huge Piramid
Begun upon a large, and ample base,
Shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing.

(V, v, 95-98)

It is the vengeance of offended justice he claims for himself to the arriving courtiers; but the persistent note is that of the still-rankling grievance and the old excuse:

Revenge, for the Duchesse of Malfy, murdered
By th'Aragonian brethren: for Antonio,
Slaine by this hand: for lustfull Julia,
Poyson'd by this man: and lastly, for my selfe,
(That was an Actor in the maine of all,
Much 'gainst my own good nature, yet i'th'end
Neglected.)

(V, v, 102-108)

And so Bosola ends on the very complaint uttered on his first entry. His is not the Duchess's virtue, whatever he prates of justice. The memory of Cariola, of the children, of the servant

so easily disposed of, is too vivid. When Bosola is his "own example," conscience seems non-existent; his egoistic concerns are plainly uppermost. When "imitating" the Duchess and trying to help Antonio, he is hopelessly ineffective. He had enough sympathy with virtue to respond to the Duchess, and enough moral perception to recognize, eventually, the futility implicit in his choice of evil: but he had willingly made that choice and was inevitably contaminated. His ultimate illusion is to think that he can still follow conscience; what he never knows, but what Webster shows by his final words and actions, is that through his traffic with evil and his habit of self-deceit, the virtue in Bosola was rendered impotent. He is a complex character, of bewildered and unconscious hypocrisy, and he is of sufficient range to complement the Duchess in her spiritual progress. But her greatness is only a moment of light which gives foundation for nothing in the world. Even when virtue affects evil, its influence cannot endure against the malignant stars. The man of uncertain conscience is too weak, himself, to sustain it; the attitudes conditioned by the world are stronger, and they corrupt irreparably. Bosola dies, therefore, "in a mist," and his judgement is the final one:

Oh this gloomy world,
In what a shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,
Doth (womanish and fearefull) mankind live!
(V, v, 124-126)

He recommends still the cause of virtue, but he himself illustrates how restricted is its power:

Let worthy mindes nere stagger in distrust
To suffer shame and death for what is just --
Mine is another voyage.
(V, v, 127-129)

The causes of both good and evil are finally, then, confounded, absorbed into the surrounding chaos. Supposedly, now that evil has run its destructive course, the rottenness in the state is purged, and the survivors (Pescara, Delio and Antonio's son) will bring the order of France to the Duchy of Malfi. But it hardly occurs to one to relate Webster's ending to the pleasant state of things in France: Malfi belongs to a different universe. Delio's closing speech, certainly, is positive:

These wretched eminent things
 Leave no more fame behind 'em, then should one
 Fall in a frost, and leave his prints in snow --
 As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts,
 Both forme, and matter: I have ever thought
 Nature doth nothing so great, for great men,
 As when she's pleas'd to make them Lords of truth:
 "Integrity of life, is fames best friend,
 Which noblery (beyond Death) shall crowne the end."
 (V, v, 138-146)

Yet the most impressive thing here, beyond the moral sentiment, is the image of insecurity (last expressed by Bosola in his virtuous cause) and total extinction. We are left with one remembered moment of tragic greatness, and a sense of overwhelming futility.

Bosola's quest for a principle of existence is the real plot of The Duchess of Malfi, just as Flamineo's is in The White Devil. But because the story of the Duchess so clearly represents the trial of virtue, the exploration theme is much more obvious: Bosola is testing the Duchess against his own philosophy of futility -- which (like Flamineo's) is an index to the tonal framework, the pervasive atmosphere of decay and mortality. And because Webster is now working in the area of conscience and the ethical spirit, seeking some human quality that will withstand the black chaos, Bosola must be

profoundly ambiguous, sceptical to the point of disbelief, sympathetic to the point of assent. He is, therefore, the complete agnostic, investigating a principle which appeals strongly to his moral sensibility, yet convinced by experience that such a principle is totally impracticable. Only when "service" proves hopeless does he adopt the Duchess's way of loyalty and faith beyond self-concern, that which gave her strength even in death. The conversion of the villain is a good philosophical device; it provides for the final necessary stage of the trial, the erection of the Duchess's virtu against the evil which destroyed her. But there is hardly the possibility of transformation. Because of the psychological realism with which Bosola is presented, because of that brooding, self-deceiving egoism which motivates him and gives him his fascination, he cannot successfully carry the burden of virtue. It is not possible for the character as Webster conceives him: hence the final mood of futility.

The real trouble with Act V is that Webster tries, finally, to have it both ways; to persuade us, against the emotional logic of his play, that virtue and order do survive. But the integrity of life cited by Delio is of the order of Marcello's virtue, or Antonio's (both of whom are irrationally extinguished), or that of Isabella (destroyed by evil) or of the King of France, who belongs to a different world. The virtue Webster has in fact proved valid is an endurance of the spirit attainable only by the spiritually great; for the rest, even the brilliant existentialists, there is only defiance and the ultimate descent to darkness and dust. The fact that the intellectual and

emotional resolutions are on different levels of conviction -- one satisfactorily tidy, but disconnected from the disturbing pessimism of the other which is certainly the resolving mood of the plot -- indicates a certain dishonesty on Webster's part; at least a lack of clear vision or formal control. Such weaknesses are important considerations in a final judgement of his thought and of his art.

IV

CONCLUSION

Websterian criticism, as we have seen, frequently ends with qualified judgement. The excellence in the plays (the dazzling imagery, the massive theatrical effectiveness) is never denied, but the flaws inevitably claim attention -- the equivocal characterization, the clumsy construction, the discrepancies between mood and moral statement. Where in the playwright is the weakness that causes these flaws? The end-purpose of this study is to illuminate the nature of Webster's shaping activity, and to suggest why he never created a controlled tragic structure.

When we review the subject matter of the plays, it is evident that Webster was seriously concerned with the problem of corruption, of the society governed by unscrupulous powers where morality is based on the semblance of virtue, and not the fact. His preoccupation emerges from the piled-up images of false appearances, and from the many examples of hypocrisy and deceit: his general theme is moral confusion, the misdirection of human abilities. The image patterns express his meaning unmistakably, but discussions often founder on what may be deliberate ambiguities of character or motivation. Subtleties are to be expected, but we expect also some index of discrimination, a clue to the direction of the playwright's meaning.

Webster's use of Flamineo and Bosola for detached commentary, for manipulation of the heroines, and for the few soliloquies, makes it not hard to suppose that these are the characters he was most interested in.

Certainly, while they are complex and quick-shifting in guise, a sustained intention behind both makes them basically consistent, and they do much to clarify apparent problems in the design.

The problem of The White Devil is not finally Vittoria herself, but whether Flamineo is adequate as a structural principle. The quest motive as he embodies it is in the rhythm of Webster's particular method of composition -- vivid self-contained passages and quick changes in direction; the moving purpose behind is deliberate, but not fluent, and one readily gains an impression of disorder in both thought and structure. Yet the motive is definite enough to be evident in a production of the play, and I think that careful characterization of Flamineo, emphasizing the probing curiosity, would make the design clear. By the same device it should be possible to avoid confusion over the conventional moral dicta which seem to make the scale of values ambiguous. The sententiae never really convince us; in the mouth of one such as Monticelso they become patently meaningless. Flamineo alone is reliable as a commentator, and his satire renders all other judgements suspect: the dicta only add to the confusion. The sole positive standard, when it is eventually pronounced, is that of masculine virtue, stoic defiance: an amoral value. The difficulty is to stress the conflict between the satiric and the heroic in such a way as to give the play an obvious propulsion; and this can be done only through Flamineo. This kind of theorizing of course indicates a fundamental weakness: that by dramatizing confusion, Webster has almost lost control of his structure. Yet The White Devil can be a highly effective play, because the formal principle does exist, and there is no serious philosophical ambiguity, despite first impressions.

The Duchess of Malfi is a play of greater range, but in the last analysis it is more critically flawed. The problem it presents is different, for here the scale of moral judgement is clear enough: the conflict is between good and evil. While Bosola, like Flamineo, is conducting an investigation, he is doing so in a different sphere, and his inner ambiguity is of foremost importance. The difficulty here is the picture-frame of conventional morality. It is useful initially to establish the poles of the conflict (represented by Malfi and France); but the essential plot proceeds to the allegorical level, and when the idea of conventional virtue is rediscovered amid the chaos and futility of the final act, it jars irrelevantly. Is it that Webster simply handles the end of the play inadequately, or is there a more significant flaw? In Chapter III it became clear that Act V is a necessary extension of the Duchess's story, an organic part of Webster's examination of the contest between virtue and the corrupt world, and in it he pursues the theme to its logical conclusion -- a conclusion of awful futility, in the spectacle of madness and destruction, and especially in the failure of Bosola.

It seems in fact that Webster himself could not quite come to terms with this spectacle, and resorted to easy morality for consolation. For apart from the technical clumsiness and the moral contradictions, readers find something disturbing in this Act. It is more than anti-climax; it is the fact that total confusion should be the outcome of the profoundly moving Act IV. Yet this mood of pessimism is the essence of Webster's final vision, and in trying to temper it he showed a certain lack of honesty.

The shortcoming of Act V as a concluding statement is symptomatic of Webster's own limitations as a thinker and dramatist. The dual vision he leaves us with is an evasion of the issue he has studied. The division in the playwright modifies his achievement; like Bosola, he likes the idea of moral order, but he is emotionally dominated by pessimism. His plays are flawed by his inability to remain consistently in one area of thought. The Duchess of Malfi shows the development of his interest from the limited worldliness of The White Devil, yet in the earlier play he also broached the topic of conscience and self-deception. Both his plays are philosophically inconsistent: in his study of spiritual conflict he pulls in a kind of morality inapplicable to the world of his play; in his study of amoral vitality, he indicates briefly that this is an insufficient principle of existence for the man who is troubled with conscience. The consequences are less serious in The White Devil, for the Flamineo sub-plot serves to define the existential principle without contradiction: the formal consequence is an unintegrated, non-relevant episode. But in The Duchess of Malfi we are left with an awkward contradiction between the resolution effected and the sentiment professed. Webster's thinking is experimental: he seems fascinated by his own compulsion to explore the limits of human experience, but he does not discipline his straying ideas adequately, and the flaws in his thought create flaws in his art. In the final analysis, the essential controlling principle of his plays is his own searching, compromising curiosity. Hence the importance of the quest motives of Flamineo and Bosola: certainly it is the conclusions of their stories

that govern our final impression of each play, and the critical moments in their careers are, formally, the moments which reveal most about the nature of the playwright's talent.

The critics, I think, will continue to disagree about Webster, because none of the often excellent readings, which aim to establish him "second to Shakespeare" in the hierarchy of tragedians, can quite resolve the dichotomy between what he says and what he patently feels. Perhaps it is in part his method that betrays him, his readiness to use second-hand sentences which are false to the instinctive perceptions of his own mind. Webster did not write great tragedy, because he had not the intellectual integrity to sustain a tragic design. He lacked also the architectonic sense. But there is much to compensate: a drama alive with subtleties, rich in poetic texture and dramatic effect. We judge a play first according to these standards, and by virtue of the vibrancy of his particular world Webster will always merit considerable attention. Then we judge a play according to its symbolic quality, the degree to which it illuminates human experience. Webster does not give us, as Shakespeare does, a final sense of justification for pain and insecurity; what he does create is a profound sense of darkness at the heart of existence. The evil in his plays is never spent, and (in Rupert Brooke's phrase) "Human beings are writhing grubs in an immense night." Yet the vitality of his creatures and his poetry is the more remarkable against this pervasive mood:

Through darknesse Diamonds spred their ritchest light.

FOOTNOTES

Quotations are taken from Works, ed. Lucas.

Chapter I:

¹Of all that Webster wrote, only The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi are tragedies and plays of real interest: this study, like most studies of Webster, will consider these alone. The one other surviving play attributed to Webster in its entirety is the tasteless tragi-comedy The Devil's Law-Case; this lacks completely the density of imagery which distinguishes the other two, and gives evidence mainly of severely diminished talent in the playwright.

²"E. E. Stoll compared Aetheist's Tragedy (1611), I, iv: '-- A rape, a rape, a rape! -- How now? -- What's that? -- Why what is 't but a Rape to force a wench to marry?', and R. Brooke compared Chapman, Chabot (pf. c. 1613), V, ii, 122: 'a most prodigious rape, a rape even upon Justice itself'." See Brown, ed., WD, 80.

³See Boklund, Sources of "WD"; and "DM": Sources.

⁴See the excellent study by Dent, Webster's Borrowing.

⁵Cf. note² above. Lucas gives further examples: from Montaigne's line, "The opinion of wisdom is the plague of man" (Essays, II, 12), Webster makes, "O Sir, the opinion of wisdom is a foule tetter, that runs all over a mans body" (DM, II, i, 81-2). From William Alexander's

As those who dreame sweet dreames, awakt, at last,
Do finde their errour when their eyes finde light" --
(Alexandrian Tragedy, 2361-2)

Webster gives us:

I stand like one
That long hath ta'ne a sweet, and golden dreame.
I am angry with my selfe, now that I wake.
(DM, IV, ii, 349-51)

See Lucas, DM, 216-221.

⁶A point made by Scott-Kilvert, Webster, 33.

⁷Lucas compared J. Maplet, Green Forest (1567), K5: "[The adder] loueth . . . to hurt both with tooth and mouth, and also with his hinder part or taile".

⁸See Brown's account, WD, xxxvii ff.

⁹Bogard, in Tragic Satire, analyses thoroughly Webster's debt to Chapman (chap. II) and Marston (chap. IV).

¹⁰Brown's adjective.

¹¹Ekeblad, "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster," RES, IX, 253-267.

¹²Brown makes this point, WD, xli.

¹³Cf. Van Ghent, in her Introduction to The English Novel; also on 127 and 172.

¹⁴Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions.

¹⁵Lucas, Works, I, 17.

¹⁶Compare the view of Ribner in Jacobean Tragedy, 105-122, with those of Stoll, John Webster and Elmslie, "Motives in Malfi," EIC, IX, 391-405. Mulryne's middle-line view is that the Duchess is compromised by deceit; see "WD and DM," Jacobean Theatre, 200-225.

¹⁷See Thayer, "The Ambiguity of Bosola," SP, LIV, 162-171.

¹⁸Ornstein, Jacobean Tragedy, 128-150.

¹⁹Ribner, Jacobean Tragedy, 100.

²⁰Scott-Kilvert, Webster, 15.

²¹Bogard, Tragic Satire, 38 ff.

²²Cecil, Poets and Storytellers, 25-43; Jack, "The Case of John Webster," Scrutiny, XVI, 38-43. Ellis-Fermor, in Jacobean Drama, 170-190, judges Webster more kindly than Jack does, but comes to a similar conclusion about his divided vision.

²³Leech, "An Addendum on Webster's Duchess," PQ, XXXVII, 253-256.

²⁴Prior also makes this point in Language of Tragedy, 121.

²⁵Price, "The Function of Imagery in Webster," PMLA, LXX, 717-739. Davies interprets Webster in a similar fashion, showing how "Certain themes, some major and some minor, are both exemplified in the fable and expressed in the imagery." See "The Structure of DM: An Approach," English, 89-93.

²⁶Cf. Dean in his Introduction to Elizabethan Drama.

²⁷Ribner, Jacobean Tragedy, 100.

²⁸Cf. the studies by Boklund and Thayer.

²⁹It was part of Webster's characteristic method to rework his creations (whether image, character or situation) repeatedly and persistently. So lines and metaphors reappear; the villains' camp in both WD and DM consists of Duke and Cardinal; and Bosola is clearly a reworking of Flamineo, modified by Webster's developing ideas. Romelio in The Devil's Law-Case is a later version of the same character: he intrigues for his own advantage, assumes disguises, and rails satirically against women and cuckolds and the vanity of the world; but his mockery has neither the imagistic vividness nor the verbal energy that distinguish both Flamineo and Bosola.

Chapter II:

All line references are to The White Devil.

¹A point made by both Boklund in Sources of "WD", 181 ff., and Mulryne in his essay in Jacobean Theatre, 200 ff.

²Mulryne's phrase, Jacobean Theatre, 204.

³Cf. Bogard's theory about the relation between tragic and satiric modes in Webster: Tragic Satire.

⁴Mulryne, Jacobean Theatre, 204.

⁵I, i, 3-4. Cf. Bogard, Tragic Satire, chap. VI.

⁶Mulryne, Jacobean Theatre, 201.

⁷See Bogard, Tragic Satire, chap. IV, on the development of the Malcontent-Machiavel type.

⁸Bogard's phrase.

⁹Dent, Webster's Borrowing, 29.

¹⁰Bogard's term.

¹¹Tomlinson makes this point about the speeches of Bosola in Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy, 132-157.

¹²Price analyses these in detail in "The Function of Imagery in Webster," PMLA, LXX, 717-739.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴See text, 13.

¹⁵"See she comes, what reason have you to be jealous of this creature? what an ignorant asse or flattering knave might he be counted, that should write sonnets to her eyes, or call her brow the snow of Ida, or Ivorie of Corinth, or compare her haire to the blacke birds bill, when 'tis liker the blacke birds feather" (I, ii, 112-116).

¹⁶This "enclosing" technique is used again in Act V, scene iii, where Flamineo's preceding and subsequent remarks to Mulinassar on the death of Princes create a horribly ironic frame for Brachiano's death agony.

¹⁷Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions, 187.

¹⁸Know many glorious woemen that are fam'd
For masculine vertue have been vitious,
Onely a happier silence did betyde them.
She hath no faults who hath the art to hide them.
(V, vi, 244-247)

This shows effectively Flamineo's sceptical view of conventional morality, and that the one quality he admires is independent of conventional value judgements.

¹⁹Leech, Webster, 48.

²⁰By "existentialism" I do not wish to imply any specific or twentieth century concept. The term can be used, I think, to denote that carpe diem mode of existence by which a man seizes every available means of self-expression and self-gratification regardless often of caution and of moral prohibitions. Thus Vittoria's opportunism and Brachiano's self-indulgence can be seen as existentialism in the same vein.

²¹v, i, 130-138.

²²Zanche is another figure who exemplifies the debasement of love in the courtly world.

²³Cf. Ornstein's theory about "the futility of the emancipated criminal will" in Jacobean Tragedy, 136 ff.

24 they say affrights cure agues:
Thou hast a Devill in thee; I will try
If I can scarre him from thee: Nay sit still:
My Lord hath left me yet two case of Jewels
Shall make me scorn your bounty; you shall see them.
 (V, vi, 18-22)

It is interesting also to note Vittoria's response to Flamineo's intrusion: "Ha, are you drunke?" and compare his words in I, ii to Cornelia: "this face of mine /I'll arme and fortifie with lusty wine, /'Gainst shame and blushing." In electing the ways of evil, Flamineo has to drown the moral instinct which emerges in V, iv.

²⁵Boklund, Sources of "WD", 177 ff.

Chapter III:

All line references are to The Duchess of Malfi, unless otherwise stated.

¹These opinions are expressed by e.g. Lucas in Works; Leech in Webster, Scott-Kilvert in Webster.

²Boklund, "DM": Sources, 121.

³See text, 31-34.

⁴Cf. Bogard, Tragic Satire, 132.

⁵Cf. Boklund, "DM": Sources, 167.

⁶WD, II, ii, 56.

⁷It is Antonio's association with France which establishes him as an honest man and a reliable commentator.

⁸A point made by Ellis-Fermor in Jacobean Drama, 170-190.

⁹In the light of Antonio's statement about the "informing" of Princes, Bosola's role as intelligencer to Ferdinand is particularly ironic.

¹⁰Boklund's interpretation is similar.

11I, i, 303-311.

¹²Cf. Ornstein, Jacobean Tragedy, 128-150.

¹³Cf. Antonio's words to Bosola:
 You would look up to Heaven, but I thinke
 The Divell, that rules i'th'aire, stands in your light.
 (II, i, 97-98)

¹⁴I, i, 56-60.

¹⁵I, i, 249-252.

¹⁶II, i, 65-67.

¹⁷II, i, 110-120, 162-166.

¹⁸Cf. Cariola's lines:
 Whether the spirit of greatnes, or of woman
 Raigne most in her, I know not, but it shewes
 A fearefull madnes.
 (I, i, 576-578)

¹⁹II, ii, 13-25.

²⁰Ferdinand's speech is packed with images of bestiality and natural terror e.g. "the howling of a Wolfe," "screch-Owle," "Dogs, and Monkeys," "ecclipse," "plagues," "Witches," etc.

²¹It is worth noticing Antonio's association with children (I, i, 456, 553) as well as the images of birds and "unambitious shepherds."

²²Cf. Boklund, "DM": Sources, 105.

²³III, iii, 58-76.

²⁴Cf. Antonio's words:
 "Man (like to Cassia) is prov'd best, being bruiz'd."
 (III, v, 89)

²⁵Cf. Bogard's analysis.

²⁶III, v, 115-120.

²⁷Cf. Thayer, "The Ambiguity of Bosola," SP, LIV, 162-171. Thayer bases his interpretation of Bosola on this line, suggesting that the "counterfeit face" refers to the present pose of derision against Antonio, and that the "other" is the goodness which Bosola conceals but gave expression to in III, iii.

²⁸Bos. One of no Birth.
Dutch. Say that he was born mean . . .
 Man is most happy, when's owne actions
 Be arguments, and examples of his Vertue.
 (III, v, 143-146)

²⁹See Bradbrook's discussion of this passage in "Two Notes Upon Webster," MLR, XLII, 281-291.

³⁰See Davies, "The Structure of The Duchess of Malfi: An Approach," English, XII, 89-93.

³¹See Ekeblad, "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster," RES, IX, 253-67.

³²See Elmslie's discussion of the blood motif in "Motives in Malfi," EIC, IX, 391-405.

³³Only a "fantasticall" scholar, indeed, would indulge his curiosity at this extremity.

³⁴Cf. Tomlinson's essay on Webster in Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy, 132-157.

³⁵IV, ii, 298-306.

³⁶IV, ii, 329-340.

³⁷IV, ii, 377-380.

³⁸This word I used above (text, 37) to denote that quality in Vittoria which is admirable although it lies outside the conventional moral scale. The Duchess represents virtue proper, but since this quality in her supplies the same radiance in the world of the play as does Vittoria's amoral integrity in WD, I think it is legitimate to describe it also as virtu.

³⁹See Bradbrook's essay on fate and chance in DM, "Two Notes," MLR, XLII, 281-291.

⁴⁰IV, ii, 353 ff.

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Abbreviations:

<u>DM</u>	<u>The Duchess of Malfi</u>
<u>WD</u>	<u>The White Devil</u>
<u>EIC</u>	<u>Essays in Criticism</u>
<u>MLR</u>	<u>Modern Language Review</u>
<u>PMLA</u>	<u>Publications of the Modern Language Association of America</u>
<u>PQ</u>	<u>Philological Quarterly</u>
<u>RES</u>	<u>Review of English Studies</u>
<u>SP</u>	<u>Studies in Philology</u>

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